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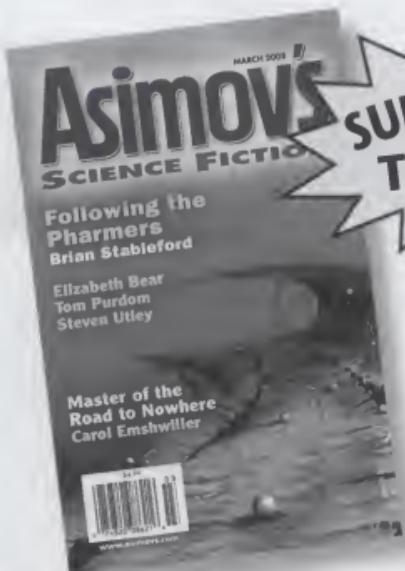
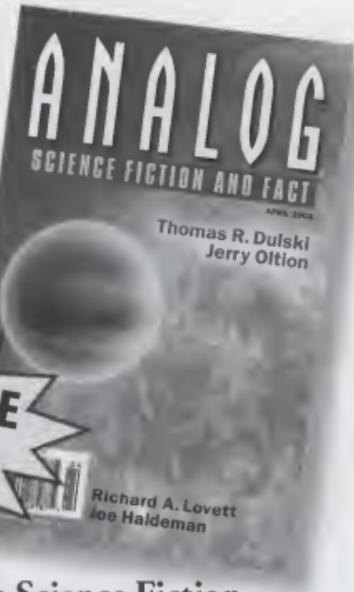
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APRIL/MAY 2010

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by Duncan Long

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GUEST EDITORIAL

B-SIDE MENTALITY

Brian Bieniowski

As a kid growing up in the early eighties, I was forever raiding my parents' record collection. It wasn't large, but it was eclectic, for my mother and father had different tastes in music, so I was just as likely to end up with an Ennio Morricone film score as I was the Beatles. I played the hell out of some of those records, and I learned to love music because of them.

My mother also had a stack of 45s, which I didn't play as frequently, but loved just the same. Getting the plastic piece into the center of the vinyl was a challenge for a six year old, and sometimes I looked at the creepy covers of the Rolling Stones singles instead. One I did play often was the Monkees' #3 hit single "Valleri," which I liked because of its earnest Beach Boys harmonies. On the flip-side was another track called "Tapioca Tundra," a Mike Nesmith psych-folk experiment. This track was really weird; Mike sang strange metaphysical lyrics as if on distant Mars.

I soon grew tired of "Valleri" played over and over and found I preferred the b-side of the 45 (and many of the other 45s' b-sides as well) to the a-side, and, in the process, grew to appreciate the side of rock and pop in the sixties that was somewhat further afield. This lead me to a lot of *truly* weird music years later.

While listening to "Tapioca Tundra" again this morning, (in retrospect, it sounds like the music Love were doing around the same time and not all that strange), I thought of the b-side, an outmoded artifact in a world of digital music sales and ever-more-disposable pop music, but once a valuable gateway for the listener to explore an artist's work, and a critical venue for musicians to express themselves in a way that was impossible as a pop song. With time, artists felt comfortable putting these experiments on their LPs, and the album-length work was born, yielding many masterpieces.

I have long felt that the short story in science fiction functions in a similar way. It's a difficult medium to excel in, but it allows the writer to express ideas and experiment in a fashion that is unavailable to them elsewhere. It is, as J.G. Ballard wrote, "coined from precious metal, a glint of gold that will glow for ever in the deep purse of your imagination." You may not like every short story, in fact I can guarantee with certainty that you won't. And you absolutely cannot expect the short story, no matter how well told, to deliver five hundred pages of exactly what you want in fiction. That is not what short stories, at their best—science fiction or otherwise—are for. They are the ships that leave the harbor and explore the liminal boundaries of storytelling in a microcosmic way that is impossible for novels, simply by their very nature. These short story ships may not return, they may founder in seas near and far, but it is our belief at *Asimov's* that their journeys are crucial to the well-being and advancement of all SF literature, by virtue of their willingness to explore and experiment.

A similar role is held by short fiction venues and their editors. A good editor, whether of short story magazine or anthology, will provide stories that fall within your entertainment comfort zone, as well as stories intended to challenge and expand your interest and appreciation of science fiction. The pleasure of a magazine or anthology is in enjoying a new story. It's easy to search out the stories by authors you love, but it's also thrilling to discover a great work of fiction you wouldn't have otherwise come across. This experience is good for everybody—writers, editors, and readers—and each month we strive to provide it for you in these pages.

A noted blogger and writer in the SF community once opined that nobody wants albums anymore in a world where

one has the option to purchase (or file-share) only the songs that he or she wants. According to the blogger, artists and record labels no longer possess a choke-hold on what music you consume; you can pick and choose at will according to your own tastes and piques. On the surface, doing away with albums sounds like a positive idea, and to some extent it is. Many of them contain filler, though that determination is arguable. It's of value to have the option of taking only the songs you want, especially if you happen to just like one or two songs on a record. It's a fair system, and it explains the popularity of the 45 up until the late-eighties—unless you enjoy underground music, where the seven-inch has never died. Still, I don't believe it's true that real fans of music, no matter what genre, aren't interested in the album as art-form. I can't imagine the insane world where it is preferable to listen to only one song of the Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* or My Bloody Valentine's *Loveless* instead of the entire album.

There are psychological considerations to make before we switch over to a wholly user-generated taste-set, whether we are speaking of music or SF stories. As a young man, I appreciated very much that Carter, Pohl, and Merril were there to point the way to fine short stories by authors I'd never before encountered, just as adventurous album explorers might discover more difficult visions alongside pop revelations on records like *Low*, *Innervisions*, and *Remain in Light*.

As readers and listeners, it's a disservice to limit ourselves to already established tastes and comfort zones. It is better to take chances and try to understand why artists, writers, and editors made the decisions they made. The venue of recommendation doesn't matter, whether it be website, magazine, or friend—it is the willingness to explore and push our personal boundaries that is important. I hope you'll continue to support the SF short story and its many venues—and we believe there can never be enough outlets for the medium—and that you'll share our b-side mentality at *Asimov's* in years to come. ☺

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SHOWING AND TELLING II

In last issue's column I talked about the catchphrase "Show, Don't Tell," so familiar to anyone who has ever attended a class in writing or a writers' workshop. I spoke of how beginning writers are warned against stopping a story's action to insert a slug of narrative explanation of the sort that writing teachers label "expository lumps" or "infodumps." I quoted an example of lump-free fiction by Ernest Hemingway, the most outspoken early advocate of a method of storytelling that depended on a minimum of auctorial exposition to convey the meaning of a story, and I devoted quite a bit of space to the work of Robert A. Heinlein, who, more than anyone else in our field, made use of Hemingway's narrative innovations in order to bring the unfamiliar future to life without the aid of expository lumps or, worse, stodgy masses of footnotes. Hemingway believed that the way to tell a story was to show people *doing* things, not to have the author interpret their deeds for us in little asides. Hemingway wrote about what we like to think of as the real world; but Heinlein brilliantly demonstrated how one could even drop one's readers down in the bewilderingly unfamiliar future without explaining anything to them, letting them find their own way around in the strange environment into which they had been thrust.

What, then, are we to make of a passage like this one? It is the opening paragraph, no less, of a very well-known novel.

"Robert Cohn was once middleweight boxing champion of Princeton. Do not think I am very much impressed by that as a boxing title, but it meant a lot to Cohn. He cared nothing for boxing, in fact he disliked it, but he learned it painfully and thoroughly to counteract the feeling of inferiority and shyness he had felt on

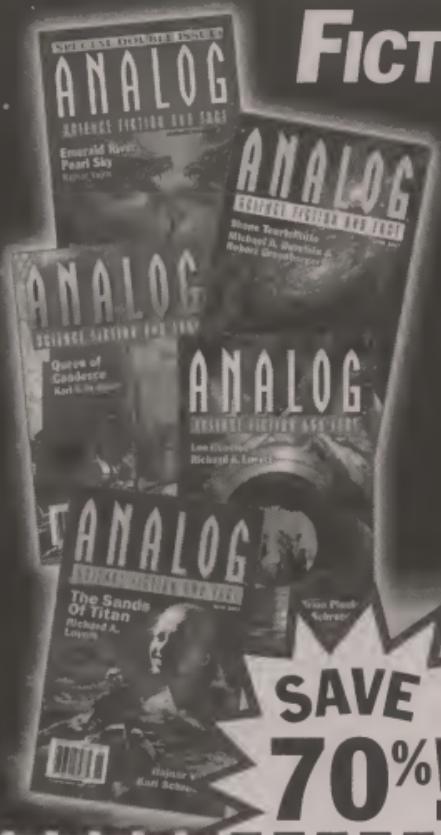
being treated as a Jew at Princeton. There was a certain inner comfort in knowing he could knock down anybody who was snooty to him, although, being very shy and a thoroughly nice guy, he never fought anybody except in the gym. He was Spider Kelly's star pupil. . . ."

The passage continues in this vein—an expository lump if ever there was one—for three pages. We hear about Robert Cohn's family, his marital difficulties, his financial problems, his literary ambitions, and his departure for Paris, where, finally, on the third page of the book, we see him in a café with a couple of American friends, and one of them—the narrator of the book, as it happens—says, "I know a girl in Strasbourg who can show us the town." It is the first bit of dialog in the book and it does, after a fashion, foreshadow the theme of the book, which deals with the adventures and disillusionments of a group of young American expatriates in France just after World War I. And eventually the focus of the book shifts from Robert Cohn to the real protagonist, who is the narrator, one Jake Barnes.

You may, very probably, have guessed from these hints that the novel is *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway, his second and perhaps greatest book. But how can we account for the gigantic infodump—concerning a secondary character, even—that begins the story, and the delay with which the author introduces the webwork of conflicts that constitute the plot of the novel? Can this really be by Hemingway, the advocate of minimal editorializing and swift narrative movement? Yes, it can, apparently.

And I've been reading the collected short stories of John Cheever lately. He's generally considered one of the finest short-story writers of the twentieth centu-

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ry, an opinion with which I concur. This is the opening of "Just Tell Me Who It Was":

"Will Pym was a self-made man; that is, he had started his adult life without a nickel or a connection, other than the general friendliness of man to man, and had risen to a vice-presidency in a rayon-blanket firm. He made a large annual contribution to the Baltimore settlement house that had set his feet upon the right path, and he had a few anecdotes to tell about . . ."

Expository! Expository!

"Mr. Hatherly had many old-fashioned tastes. He wore high yellow boots, dined at Luchow's in order to hear the music, and slept in a woolen nightshirt. His urge to establish in business a patriarchal liaison with some young man who would serve as his descendant, in the fullest sense of the word, was another of these old-fashioned tastes. Mr. Hatherly picked for his heir . . ."

Another expository opening; Cheever again, "The Children."

Well, you say, Cheever and Hemingway are writing character-driven stories, in which it is, perhaps, legitimate to do a quick passage of expository biography by way of providing a fix on a character, whereas science fiction is generally plot-driven and technology-driven, and it is clumsy writing to move a science fiction plot along through chunks of exposition and to depict a novel technological gimmick with a flatfooted infodump. Maybe so. But Cheever wrote at least one story that could be called science fiction, "The Enormous Radio," and it, too, opens in expository fashion. ("Jim and Irene Westcott were the kind of people who seem to strike that satisfactory average of income, endeavor, and respectability that is reached by the statistical reports in college alumni bulletins.") Despite its clever SF gimmick, though (a new radio that somehow picks up private conversations from all over a Manhattan apartment house), it, too, turns out to be character-driven in the end; so perhaps it is permissible, in a character-driven story, to be expository. Perhaps. (To see how a

theme much like that of "The Enormous Radio" can be handled in the pure SF mode, minus expository baggage, check out Henry Kuttner's classic story "The Twonky," where all the emphasis is on plot, not character.)

But sometimes even Heinlein, our own apostle of non-expository writing, found it necessary to slow things down and deliver a history lecture. He always gets the story started quickly, of course. But we see in his much-anthologized "The Roads Must Roll" that after five pages of effective scenes in the action mode he suddenly halted the pace and wrote this:

"The Age of Power blends into the Age of Transportation almost imperceptibly, but two events stand out as landmarks in the change: the achievement of cheap sun power and the installation of the first mechanized road. The power resources of oil and coal of the United States had—save for a few sporadic outbreaks of common sense—been shamefully wasted in their development all through the first half of the twentieth century. Simultaneously, the automobile . . ."

And so on for two pages before he gets back to Heinlein-esque storytelling. We find the same thing in his well-known novella "Waldo," where, when an explanation is needed early on, Heinlein takes a deep breath and says, "It may plausibly be urged that the shape of a culture—its mores, evaluations, family organization, eating habits, living habits, pedagogical methods, institutions, forms of government, and so forth—arise from the economic necessities of its technology." Again, the passage continues for two more pages. It's Heinlein in his most professorial mode, offered without apology. If we look carefully at almost any Heinlein tale, in fact, we will find him slipping in little background lectures whenever he needs one—not as blatantly as in "Waldo," but they are there, despite his often-stated insistence that the best way to write science fiction was simply to show the future as a going concern, without stopping to explain anything.

Heinlein provides his own justification

for that in his famed 1947 essay, "On the Writing of Speculative Fiction," where he says, "Don't write to me to point out how I have violated my own rules in this story or that. I've violated all of them and I would much rather try a new story than defend an old one." (He also notes the distinction between plot-driven and character-driven stories, but he thinks, as I do, that science fiction can accommodate both types: "There are at least two principal ways to write speculative fiction—write about people, or write about gadgets.") And then he observes that Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men* achieves greatness in science fiction without paying much attention either to characters or gadgets. As Kipling says—also quoted by Heinlein—"There are nine-and-sixty ways of constructing tribal lays, and every single one of them is right!"

Where are we, then?

If expository lumps are such evil things, as the teachers of fiction-writing keep telling us, why do we find Hemingway and Cheever and even Heinlein indulging in them?

The answer, I think, is that sometimes, especially in a story that depends heavily on the depiction of character, or in one that is set against a truly unfamiliar

background, the expository lump becomes a necessity rather than a vice. It's a good idea, especially in a genre like science fiction whose readers tend to get impatient whenever a story starts to slow, not to indulge in such things too extensively. But if a writer is good enough—if he has that inner force, that verbal charisma, that all the top professional writers have and the hopeless amateurs lack—he can get away with anything. A great writer like Jack Vance can pepper his books with dry footnotes that would not have been out of place in one of Hugo Gernsback's magazines of 1928, and no one will mind. Hemingway or Cheever can start a story with a mini-biography of a character, and it will be reprinted a thousand times. Robert A. Heinlein, when he wants to tell you how his rolling roads came into being, will just stop and tell you, and nobody minds.

So the rebuttal to writing-school dogmas is that the way to stop thinking about whether expository lumps are good writing or bad writing is to be as good a writer as Hemingway, Cheever, Heinlein, or Vance, and then you can do whatever you want. Unfortunately, that's something that the writing schools don't seem to be able to teach. ○

KITCHEN DEITIES

The refrigerator god
And the stove god
Are not always on good terms.

Cooking is easier
If your offerings are acceptable to both.

—Ruth Berman



Greg Bossert spent twenty years as a software developer, starting in his native Cambridge, Massachusetts, and roaming to Manhattan, New Jersey, Berlin, and the San Francisco Bay Area. Eight years ago, his passions overwhelmed his day job; since then, he's done research and design for a handful of feature films (including *Beowulf* and *Tim Burton's Alice in Wonderland*); built and played experimental musical instruments, worked on sound design, editing, animation, and screenwriting for independent film and video projects; and has recently been focused full-time on writing. Examples of all can be found at his website, www.suddensound.com. His very first sale is a thrilling story about a group of archeologists and their desperate race against time to uncover the secret of ...

THE UNION OF SOIL AND SKY

Gregory Norman Bossert

The loop around Winifred's braid finally gave way with a snap and the sting of uprooted hairs. She cursed, reflexively, but she had a much better view of the chalice rim with her head actually in the hole, and anyway, who exactly on this dig was going to complain about the state of her hair? Or even notice it, despite the brilliant magenta dye she had refreshed just the night before. Well, Inanna, perhaps, might, but there was a long list of reasons why her regard didn't count. Starting with, Inanna kept her observations to herself, and only the careful application of patience and alcohol could get her to express an opinion on one of her fellow archaeologists. Or an opinion at all, for that matter, except when it came to lumps and bumps in the landscape, on which she could be tediously persistent.

These thoughts floated on the surface of her mind, barely heeded, a useful distraction from the gut-churning work her hands were performing. Alternating the tip of her trowel with a coarse-haired brush, she was tracing the edge of the chalice back around to the high point she had first revealed. Another few centimeters, and the rim would be clear, and she could start the careful process of lifting it free of the dirt. The last chunk of soil came away in one piece, claylike and gritty with silicates; it bore an impression of the tracery around the rim of the glass bowl, which was sitting bottom up in the center of the burial pit she had been excavating for the last day and a half. The piece, an "offering chalice type four" in Mort's nomenclature, or a "top hat" to everyone else on the dig, was in almost perfect condition, the rim em-

bossed with the writhing shapes ubiquitous to these burials, shapes they'd dubbed "dragons" after their resemblance to the mythical Chinese creature. Definitely the best find of the season for her, possibly, she mused, the best find of the dig so far, as the trowel point slipped under the rim, highlights spilling across the green-gold glass as it shifted, just slightly, and . . . it all went obscure as a shadow fell across the pit. Winifred let go of the trowel immediately, for fear of cracking the rim, and cursed again, this time with deliberation.

She looked up into a round face, blank against the brilliant sky, a flutter like leaves brushing her shoulder and a gentle waft of spice and mold. She squinted against the sneeze that always seemed to hang around the *keeper*, and which could be disastrous now, with her hand still in the hole, centimeters from the delicate glass. A second touch on her shoulder, and then a flicker of the long, twig-like fingers, impossible to read against the silhouetted shape.

"For goodness' sake, Henry!" Winifred carefully extracted her hand from the hole, and levered her upper body out of the pit, cautious of the clumps and pebbles stuck to her shirt, and no doubt matted in her hair, which could rain ruin onto the delicate glass. "What now?" And then again, in sign, two slow waves of the hand, like wind through stalks, then a downward twist into an open palm; "*greetings again after a short time, and how can I aid you?*," that was; there was no way to be rude in the *keeper* signing, not and make any sense.

"*the seed uncovered greets the sun with green,*" Henry signed, and, "*the soil-mother holds close her blossoms.*"

"The soil-mother can kiss my dirty ass," she muttered, which really wasn't offensive, given the rituals the *keepers* dedicated to the gentle, fecund matriarch of their pantheon. But she signed back reassurance, and, "*gently plucking the flower from the seed given Her long ago,*" a phrase she had developed during her doctoral studies, and one that seemed to successfully convey the idea of archeology to the natives, who had initially been startled and wary of this alien desire to dig up the detritus of their past.

"*held close her blossom,*" Henry repeated, with the wet puff of air from his nostrils that signaled emphasis, or sometimes just pigheadedness. "*blossom*" was the bowl, of course, the shape of which mimicked a type of night-blooming flower. As did most of the burial offerings; all *keeper* art was in imitation of the flora and fauna of their world; blown and drawn glass flowers and leaves both graceful and meticulous. "*held close*" could mean a loving embrace, or justified stubbornness, but it just as well indicated a type of glue, and since the humans had arrived, "*velcro.*"

Winifred snorted back, with, "*gentle gentle the wind lifts the blossom,*" and then, "*how beautiful the sky above us,*" which was a reminder, about as blunt as one could get in *keeper* gestures, that the alien was in her light.

"Hey, Henry," Ant called out, in his permanently dust-roughened growl. "Come on, mate, leave her alone." That with a wave of his hand that meant something like "*the alluvial plains seemed dry last year.*" But as always, Henry seemed to understand Ant, or at least to respond to him, with more alacrity than he did to Winifred's careful, studied attempts at communication. Maybe it was Ant's familiar scent, she thought, with just a touch of guilt, though he always did smell of earth and antiquity, not unpleasant, really. She sighed as the alien stumped off to look into Ant's trench, and raked her fingers through the gritty remnants of her braid, dislodging a small shower of dirt safely away from her pit. She refastened a simple ponytail, and looked around for Inanna.

Who was crouched over her recording tablet, staring across the site, bobbing her head up and down; like an earnest, lowly supplicant paying obeisance to some capricious lord, Winifred thought, feeling sore and sour now that her focus on the chalice had been interrupted. "Inanna, do you plan to use that tablet, or just wave it about?"

Inanna stopped bobbing—she'd been looking at hillocks and ridges in the surrounding field, no doubt—and flashed a smile in reply that made Winifred feel old and cranky. The former was not true, relatively speaking; Inanna was a year older, though most people guessed otherwise. On the same relative scale, however, the "cranky" was a good bet. Then again, Winifred thought, as a landscape archaeologist and surveyor, and as the team's primary recorder, Inanna spent less time on her knees with her head in the dirt. On cue, a clod dropped from Winnifred's hair into her lap.

"Just waving," Inanna said. "You want me to come wave it over there?"

"Yeah, I think I'm ready to lift this chalice. Could you take one last scan, please?"

"Oooh!" Inanna replied, and traced around Ant's trench with quick, careful motions of her long legs, to stand astride Winifred's pit. Blocking the light as thoroughly as Henry had, Winifred noted, though Inanna's silhouette was as spiky as Henry's was round, and fully twice as tall; she was spacer-born, all shins and elbows and careful, truncated gestures, as if still wary of tight spaces and critical controls here on the barren, open plains of Aulis.

Inanna held the tablet out over the pit, her long arms an advantage in her volunteer role as recorder, and thumbed the scan button. There was the uneasy thrum of sonics, cut by a beep as the tablet announced it had located its own position relative to the site boundaries; the beep was also Winifred's signal to shut her eyes before the strobe and sweep of the laser scan started, and finally the flash for the photo. Inanna stayed still with the tablet held out like a tea tray—from supplicant to serving girl, Winifred thought—until it belched out another beep, satisfied with the data.

"Good to go," Inanna said, leaning the tablet up against the trench wall a cautious distance from the pit, and sitting down on her heels, knees almost in her ears, in the way that always gave Winifred the urge to shove. She'd tried it once, from behind and without warning, but the lanky spacer had hardly budged; muscles toned from pulling those long bones about, gravity or not. They were all reasonably buff at this point from moving dirt; no automated diggers on this desperately underfunded, understaffed dig. Fortunately, Ant was worth a dozen diggers; the strength he'd gained in decades of excavation was uncanny. Here he came now, with Henry in his wake. The little alien was pretty much a member of the team, having arrived over a year ago now, not long after the dig had begun, and having apparently come all the way from the Argolids, four thousand kilometers away. The few local *keepers* in this desolate area seemed to regard Henry with cautious restraint. Winifred thought they found his interest in the digging somewhat simpleminded, though Ant maintained that Henry's interest in archaeology was a clear indication of his superior intelligence.

Winifred got her head back into the hole before Ant could arrive, and began to wrap the bowl in plastic film. Anthony Wessex had more experience in the field, thirty years more, give or take, and, despite his surprising strength, he had a knack for removing delicate finds in one piece. It wouldn't occur to him to step in here, however, unless asked; it was her trench and her find. And she didn't feel like asking, thank you.

"Henry seems a bit in a bother about your bowl there," Ant noted.

"Henry can . . ." Winifred started, voice booming in the hole, then continued more evenly, "Henry can go get a degree and a trowel and dig up his own damn bowl."

"Probably will at that," Ant said. And after a pause, "It's just that he may be worried about the varitropes."

Winifred tore off another sheet of film with a bit more force than necessary. "The pit is clean, and dug straight into the natural, and it's all under a layer of hard clay. There's nothing living down here."

"Nothing modern, you mean," Ant rumbled. Winifred bit her lip and managed not

to tug on the plastic. This was an ongoing debate, on several counts. Starting with whether the wormlike varitropes that riddled the site were, strictly speaking, alive, and if so, were they animal, vegetable, or some classification that had no Earthly analog. More pertinent, perhaps, to their work was whether the varitropes they dug up represented modern contamination, or whether their position in the stratigraphic sequence actually indicated their age. Winifred refused to believe that anything, living or not, could move of its own accord after thousands of years in the dirt. Ant stubbornly insisted that the fibrous clumps had to be interpreted in context unless there was evidence of them having been buried more recently, or having burrowed down on their own. The rest of the team had staked out less committed positions on the issue, with the exception of Mort, who just limited himself to noting that it was early days yet and, occasionally, that loose lips sink ships, a concept that spacer Inanna found baffling yet hilarious.

The wrapping complete, she recovered the trowel from where it was still wedged under the rim, and began to gently work it around the edge. The glass was almost opaque, flecked with gold, but it was a safe bet that the bowl was entirely filled with dirt; she had to break any suction, and then it should lift upward, like a cake pan off a, well, a mud pie. She stifled a nervous snort, or maybe it was a sneeze; she caught a whiff of mold as Henry settled in with the others to watch.

Nor was he the last, as Mort squatted down across from her with a familiar creak of old joints. "Ah, now, that is a beauty, isn't it?" he said. He'd been back at camp all day, another round of the ongoing three-way battle between the University, the local bureaucracy, and the project, the funding and approval for which only continued thanks to Mort's authority and expertise at negotiation. Many a pompous official had been taken in by Mort's plump, rosy-cheeked smile and quiet, professorial manner, not realizing until too late that he had honed his political skills to perfection in the perilous battlefields of academic advancement and grant-funded research. Winifred had learned as much about that fight for survival, studying under him first as an undergraduate and then as a doctoral candidate, as she had about extraterrestrial archaeology; she suspected, hoped, at least, that he looked on her as a successor as he grew creakily closer to retirement.

None of which, thoughts nor audience, helped her nervousness as, having run the trowel around the rim, she felt the chalice shift again. She got her fingertips under the edges of the rim, and worked them in, dirt gritting under her fingernails, until she could feel the thicker glass where the rim turned upward into the sides of the bowl. She puffed out a breath, a habit picked up from the *keepers*, and curled her fingers upward. Gold sparkled as the bowl's bottom tilted, and the glass grew a rich green in spots as the dirt began to fall away, allowing light through the surface. It was the first time, she thought, that that color had been seen for eight thousand years, with a thrill that ran up her spine and tickled the scalp under her makeshift ponytail. A thrill that, just seconds later, flared into numbing, blinding dismay as the bowl gave a sharp *crack* and split down the middle.

There was complete silence for a second, from Winifred and audience alike, and then with another *crack*, and a series of crunches, the bulk of the bowl's bottom and left side crumbled and, impossibly, began to retract into the soil. Winifred grabbed the largest remaining piece, and sat back, dizzy and uncertain what to do with it for a moment, until Ant rescued her with a sample tray. She carefully set the piece into the tray, and stepped up out of the trench. It was safe to scream and stomp there, but all that came out was a sort of hiss. She closed her eyes and turned her face up into the sun.

Voces started up below her in the trench. First Ant, with "Now that's something, ain't it?"

And then Mort, intrigued and a bit delighted, "It's varitropes, then, from underneath. Interesting. Look, they're still tugging at it."

And finally Inanna said, "Sorry, Henry, I didn't follow that."

Winifred opened her eyes, then squinted again against the sunlight, and looked down into the trench at Henry. Spots swam in her vision, but she could follow the squat alien's graceful motions well enough. "He says," she translated, "that some seeds will blossom down, and some will root up; no keeper, no one, I guess, can tell which way the sprouting will go."

They all considered this for a spell.

"Well, time for tea, then?" asked Mort.

The discussion over tea started at a low point and went down from there. John had gotten back from town with supplies and coffee—Mort and Winifred herself being the only ones who actually drank tea—and Winifred had to sit through a reenactment of the chalice incident for him, complete with Henry's cryptic summation. And that led inexorably into the discussion of varitropes.

"The archaeology is clear as day," Ant rumbled. "That bowl was in a layer that has consistently produced finds from the Late Empire era. The bowl itself is a Late Empire style, that's right, ain't it, Mort?"

"Looks to be," Mort agreed. "Fortunately, the piece that Winifred rescued includes the rim and base; good job, that, Win."

Winifred glowered.

"It seems diagnostic, classic type four." Mort continued. "Seventy-ninth century before contact, I'd say."

"And Winifred herself here says that pit was cut into the natural and capped with that hard clay that runs under the Early Migration finds in my trench. Inanna's got that on her map right there, don't you?"

Inanna was curled around the recording tablet, cleaning up her notes. She gave her small, careful nod, a smile just visible in the light from the tablet.

"Well, there it is, then," Ant concluded. "Simple stratigraphy. Those fibers were under the bowl; they've got to be Late Empire or earlier. No reason to think otherwise."

"No reason, beyond the fact that they are still alive!" Winifred replied.

"The bio guys are not sure of that," said John, from where he lay sprawled on the floor. "The varitropes are right on the edge of what might be called life; more like a virus, really. Only big." He stretched his arms out wide, though the largest varitrope found to date was about the size of a carrot, and hit Inanna in the ankle. The spacer gently kicked him back.

"Did you see that paper by Qu in last month's *XenoScience*?" she asked. "He says that the fibers couldn't have evolved; they had to have been genetically engineered. They and the host plants, together."

"By the 'Snips?'" John snorted. "No offense, Henry," he added to the oblivious alien, who was sitting near the door with a cup of water and a slice of cake. "Not much evidence of that, now, is there?"

"Well, it's early days yet, John," said Mort. "We're just beginning to get good evidence from before the Late Empire period. Who knows what technologies were lost in the Migrations? The native Aulans are certainly handy enough with the fibers. One can't help but suppose a long tradition there."

"And they use those minerals in the glass, that stuff the miners are on about, silicones and pierogis and whatnot," Ant said.

"Perovskites," John corrected. "Ceramic superconductors."

Winifred waved a hand dismissively. "Natural or manufactured, the varitropes are still organic, and complex enough to respond to all sorts of stimuli, and complex or-

ganics just don't survive eight thousand years of being buried. For goodness' sake, Anthony, if you were digging a site this old back on Earth and you found a mouse, you wouldn't assume that it was in context."

"I would until I found the hole it came through," he said.

"He would, too, you know," John said, somewhat muffled; he'd thrown his arms across his face to block the sun streaming in through the door to the tent.

"If context and relationship are the basis of archaeology, well, you've got to include the context of the other sciences. Like biology. And physics; the varitropes move, and that means a source of energy. If they've been buried for eight millennia, where do they get the energy?"

Inanna looked up from her notes. "Dormant mold spores have been found in contexts older than that, back on Earth. And they were viable, too, once they got light and nutrients."

"Hey, we can grow our own ancient 'Snips,'" John said. "Aulans," he corrected, under Winifred's glare. "Um, *keepers*."

"Nothing insulting about parsnips," Ant said. "Henry don't mind, do ya?" The alien, stubby, lumpy body and slender limbs silhouetted against the door, was looking particularly root-like; Winifred sniffed, and swirled her tea leaves.

"Well, we'll leave the growing to the lab boys, shall we?" said Mort. "We need to focus on digging while we still have access to the site."

That sounded grim. Winifred set her cup down. "Problems with the town again?"

Mort nodded, looking tired, and suddenly old. "I'm afraid the mining company has persuaded the municipal board to move up their start date. They're talking about beginning the site preparation in three weeks."

Looks of dismay all around. John sat up, banging his head on Inanna's protruding knee. Even Henry reacted; the *keepers* were almost entirely deaf, at least in human terms, but they were adept at reading expressions, and, of course, gestures.

"You told 'em that's impossible, didn't you, Mort?" asked Ant.

"I can't really tell them anything at this point, not without support from Aulis University, and that support is rather unreliable these days, I'm afraid. They're crying budget again, and the needs of other projects."

"What other projects?" asked John.

And Ant added, "Ain't no one else digging on-planet, not that I know of."

The shout of frustration Winifred had suppressed earlier threatened to bubble out. "It's not budget, it's politics. And prejudice."

Mort nodded sadly. "I'm afraid that it's much simpler for most folks to think of the *keepers* as a primitive, nomadic species."

Inanna had the confused crease between her eyes she always got when this came up, and John looked uncomfortable. Winifred and Ant exchanged glances; growing up on Earth gave one a perspective that the off-world cultures fortunately lacked.

"Makes it simpler to dig up their land, you mean," Winifred said.

Mort spread his hands helplessly. "I'm afraid our work here, showing not just millennia of settlement, but also a legacy of technological innovation and use of the natural resources, is somewhat, ah, awkward for the mining companies and their allies in the government. And they seem to have made that point rather vigorously with the oversight committee at Aulis University, who have their own politics, alas."

Winifred puffed in frustration, prompting a curious look from Henry. She had focused on native Aulan language and culture at Oxford, in an environment still awkwardly conscious of a legacy of colonialism, and had been shocked to discover the level of thoughtless assumption and outright disdain for the natives at the University on Aulis. Studies of the *keepers*' culture and history were dwarfed by the programs

devoted to Aulis's complex mineralogy, and to the associated industrial applications. Their project had only been approved because Mort had brought in funding from Earth; even so, it was tightly monitored by the local human administration.

She tugged a strand of hair behind an ear, rubbed the grit between her thumb and fingers. "What do we do, then?"

Mort scratched his head, his few remaining hairs sticking up, brilliant white in the sunlight from the door. "So, well, there's no budging on the three weeks. I did get the University to agree to send us some help for that time; anyone they can spare."

"Meantime students, that'll be," grumbled Ant.

"Well, yeah, but bodies, regardless. They can clean up and record what we have here, and that lets us open a few last trenches. At the very least, we can try to nail down the extent of the site. With luck, we'll find something outside the area slated for mining."

Winifred gave a dubious snort.

"So, that brings up the question of where to dig. John, any luck with the radar?"

John grimaced. His speciality was surveying and geophysics. Unfortunately, the exotic geology of the area and the ephemeral nature of most *keeper* artifacts had made most of his equipment and techniques useless. It wasn't a matter of no results, rather, *everything* looked equally interesting, a sea of dense, noisy data covering the entire site; artifact of the same minerals that had attracted the mining conglomerates. "No, the radar is still inconclusive. I still think there's evidence in the magnetometry of burning, well, *more* evidence of *more* burning, at the southern end of the current trenches. Or it could be a big slab of something."

"Geology, then," Ant said. The *keepers* didn't do slabs, as far as anyone had found. John shrugged.

Inanna was bouncing in her chair, in her spacer way, more vibration than actual motion. "What about my bumps?" she asked. Inanna had a passion for landscape analysis, odd in someone who'd grown up with no vistas larger than a ship's cabin. She claimed to see signs of earthworks covering a vast area to the east of the current dig. Winifred was unconvinced; the ridges and ditches were subtle at best, and *keeper* settlements tended to be small and lacking in solid, regular structures.

"Yeah, I'd like to get my hands on Inanna's bumps," said Ant, with no trace of irony. On the Argolids dig two years ago, as the result of a drunken bet, Winifred, Inanna, and their colleagues of both sexes had spent three days digging in the skimpiest costumes they could manage, in an attempt to get a reaction out of Ant. Winifred had finally resorted to tucking his trowel into the back of her shorts, a tactic that had been declared cheating, and regardless had elicited no more than a "Here, now, I was using that," though Inanna swore that he looked at the trowel suspiciously for the rest of the day.

"Inanna's bumps are looking pretty good right now," Mort agreed, with an eyebrow twitched in Winifred's direction. "Tell you what, Inanna, you and John scout out your top three locations tomorrow, and we'll put in a few test pits before the students get here."

"I've mapped them out," Inanna said, lifting the tablet. "The platform, for sure, and—"

"Tomorrow, tomorrow," Mort said, creaking to his feet. "There's plenty to do in the current trenches now, while we have the light."

Fired by equal parts caffeine and frustration, Winifred spent the next hour digging out the chalice pit. The varitropes had settled into a clump just below the remains of the chalice, which they had broken into long slivers. Inanna helped collect the shards, her long fingers carefully probing the dirt, while Winifred uprooted the var-

itropes, black and worm-like, many of which still brandished bits of glass like tiny, glittering swords. Once pulled from the soil and placed in the sample tray, however, they curled into balls and showed no inclination toward further mischief. Winifred cleaned the bottom and sides of the pit carefully, looking for signs of the varitropes' access. Inanna dutifully recorded a few soft spots in the soil, but Winifred had to admit they didn't seem to have any relationship to the fibers.

John had persuaded Ant to extend his trench another meter southward, toward the anomaly he thought he'd seen in the magnetometry. Burned patches were ubiquitous in *keeper* digs; the aliens had a tradition of glassworking as far back as archaeology could trace, but the visible remains of a glass oven were often just a slight discoloration of the soil, and a scattering of near-microscopic glass droplets. Seeing either required decent light, and Mort had made several mild comments about the advantages of the morning sun, and the limitations of the spectra of artificial lighting, finally resorting to lauding the new beer on tap at the pub in town. Ant, however, ignoring hints and temptations alike, dug into the end of the trench, first with a spade, and then with his trowel.

"What I'm wondering about," he explained, apparently to Henry, who was crouched on the spoil heap, dun skin turned bronze by the sunset, "is this cut just here. If I didn't know better, I'd say it was the edge of some sort of pit, or ditch. And a damn fine edge it is, at that."

John squinted at the trench wall, which looked to be a consistent deep brown, and shrugged. "You're still about twenty centimeters from where the readings really shot up," he said, dubiously.

But Mort tilted his head, and then got down into the trench and ran his fingers over the soil. "Just here, yeah? You're right, Anthony, a completely different texture, compacted. And look at the distribution of the gravel. As if it's been taken out and filled back in again."

Winifred got up and stretched, ambled over to the other trench, Inanna tiptoeing along behind her. Ant was tracing the cut with the point of the trowel. "It comes along here, see, and angles off under Henry. And on the other end, I think it turns here, back south."

Winifred traced the edge with her finger, the boundary clear to the touch and running razor-straight up to where she squatted, then making a ninety-degree angle out the end of the trench. "This isn't geology," she said. "This is a feature." And the soil, compacted or not, was familiar. "Outside the edge here, this is the same natural level my pit's dug into." Inanna reached down, rubbed a pinch of clay between her fingertips, gave a careful nod. "And my pit's Late Empire, so this cut predates it." Everyone nodded, basic stratigraphy, except Mort, who mouthed a silent "ah," and leaned forward to peer at the near invisible seam in the soil. "But look," she continued. "This infill, it's definitely been packed back in here, but it's the same soil. Which means . . ." She stopped, and raised an eyebrow, a habit she'd gotten from Mort, but it was Mort who obligingly played the student's part this time.

"Which means, if Winifred is correct about the phasing, that this cut is Late Empire at the latest, and possibly earlier. And without doubt the largest feature ever found from the period."

Mort straightened up, beaming at Winifred, then around at the whole team. A team grown dim as the sun gave way to dusk. "Well, so, something to get out of bed for in the morning, eh?"

John flipped his tablet and held it out, blocky pixels in rainbow shades. "But, but, we're just centimeters from the slab!"

Mort peered dubiously over his glasses. "Ah, it's a slab now for sure, is it?"

Ant tilted his head, lip jutting. "It's an awful big, straight ditch for glassworks," he

pointed out. "I reckon it wouldn't do much harm just to clear a tiny patch back to where John had his readings."

Mort rubbed his head, leaving a smudge. "Just a tiny patch."

"No more than a shovel's width," Ant agreed, and "Excuse me, there, Henry," as he pulled the shovel from the spoil heap under the alien. Henry hopped off the pile and down into the trench, sidling in next to Winifred, as Ant took a careful slice from the end of the trench. Three slices, and on the fourth, the grate of steel on stone. John produced a torch, and under the LED glare Ant troweled out the dirt, each scrape revealing more of the stone, perfectly squared and polished flat, except where it swirled out into a carved, coiling relief, a shape familiar from the dozens of burial finds they'd had in this dig alone, and the hundreds recovered since humans had come down and begun to unearth the alien past. Henry leaned forward, past Ant, and gently touched the carving. Then he looked up at Winifred, and made a single, curling gesture.

"Dragon," she translated.

Winifred counted the overlapping strands of light that fanned out across the plastic ceiling of the cabin. Four of Aulis' seven small moons were up, leaving glittering traces that Winifred could read in reflection; bronze, bright Orestes was easy, and fleeting Iphigenia, faint but visibly shifting as she watched. She rolled on her side and wished she'd had a second pint of beer, or a glass of the dry, bitter digestif the locals swore by. The human locals, that was, who tended toward dry and bitter themselves, and had been in a less than hospitable mood this evening. After sitting through a series of loud jokes about the 'Snips, and a pointedly obscene one about Earth women, and unable to get the bartender's attention despite repeated attempts, the team had left earlier than usual.

Inanna and Mort took the short way down the road to their camp, about a kilometer from the rough and tumble sprawl of what was rapidly becoming a small city. John had ditched right after dinner; with that jiggle of his leg that meant he had a new gadget waiting back at camp. Winifred and Ant took a longer loop along the gorge and out across the plateau, skirting the site and tracking over Inanna's bumps, which were surprisingly visible in the moonlight. Henry joined them at some point, his stumpy steps as always silent and strangely graceful. Winifred was tempted to go into the site, to have another look at the inexplicable slab, a gentle touch of the carved coils. But the guard wasn't evident, either on rounds or asleep, and likely to be startled either way by a visit, so they continued on to camp. The two Earthers did, anyway, Henry drifting off with a wave, "*glass and leaves under starlight look the same*", "Useful work is done for the day" was the gist of it.

This was sound advice, thought Winifred, but under the practical awareness of the busy day ahead, and the mental and physical exhaustion that came with an active dig, were layers of skittering thoughts that refused to settle down: the broken bowl, the possibility that their work would be shut down months too soon, and them at the edge of real discovery, the sullen, inarticulate resentment of the townsfolk, most of all the sense of restless, relentless hurry, antithetical to a science that dealt with millennia and sometimes seemed to take as long. She quivered suddenly with the desire to toss the covers back, stand up, and let out the shout that had failed to come that afternoon, but it was late, or rather, early, and Inanna lay asleep on her side of the cabin, silent and still in her spacer way. Instead, Winifred reached out, ran her fingers through the moonlight under the window. The fabrilum on the sill followed her fingertips, sending the reflections scattering across the ceiling. Winifred brushed its tips, carefully—they were fragile, and perilously sharp—then spread her fingers wide, palm cupping back, and the glass flower bloomed in iridescent moonlight.

A long breath in, the mix of frustration and awe she'd felt, undiminished, since that first encounter, first hands-on, or rather hands-over, encounter with Aulan variform sculpture back in London. There was a bit more frustration in the mix tonight; that unlikely combination of glass and varitrope had been the cause of her chalice disaster that afternoon. But then again, for all of her degrees, and work in the field on Aulis, she still lacked the feel for glass and fiber, and the sheer, stunning patience of the native Aulans, the "*keepers of the soil*," as they called themselves. The glass-work alone for a fabrilum, even one small enough to perch on the narrow sill before her, took months, sometimes years. And then the selecting of the varitropes, the impossible, half-living fibers that grew on, or were produced by, or infected—that was a debate that could set any random group of xenobiologists to shouting—but regardless, were carefully harvested from their host plants; ghostbush, the humans called them, for the shaking and tortured twisting they performed when approached. The fibers reacted in different ways to different stimuli, depending on soil chemistry or host plant variation or, for all human science could tell, the sevenfold phases of Aulis's moons; some twisted away from light, some stretched out toward warmth, or quivered in resonance to sound; any one varitrope might have several reactions, and there were uncounted variations. The *keeper* gardener/artists that collected the fibers seemed to have some insight or instinct for the varitropes' behavior, but mostly they were patiently persistent, testing each bush, then each clump of fiber, before harvesting those that seemed to show the desired set of reactions. And then the varitropes were sorted and measured and even trained, not like an animal with reward and punishment, but rather like a plant, with tiny stakes to encourage a stretch, or a line of lacquer to coax a curl into the desired direction. Winifred had visited the workhall of a master gardener once; as they walked past the long tables, the fibers had writhed and reached in a wave of reaction that followed them the length of the hall. The varitropes looked something like long, ebony earthworms, and the effect could have been ludicrous, but Winifred found it eerily beautiful.

And even then, after the lampworkers and gardeners had spent their months or years, and the glass and fibers were ready, the work on the fabrilum itself was only starting. Then began the patient, painstaking work of tying together the fragile bones of glass with the unpredictable muscles of the fiber, no other elements allowed, a puzzle almost as complex as the plant or animal being evoked. That final phase of construction was usually measured in days, not months, but those were continuous days, work without break until the fabrilum was complete, and came to life under the master's gesture. At any moment during that process, an unintended stimulus, a mistimed breath, a cool draft, a sudden shaft of light, and the varitropes could crush the work as thoroughly as they had the chalice today. And when the work was complete, then came the proof of the design, the culmination of the vision, as the varitropes merged into the matrix—human studies suggested both chemical and electrical crosstalk between the fibers, webs of conductivity through the glass—and the sculpture awoke to the master's gestures.

Winifred curled her fingers, all but one, and traced that one down to the sill, and the fabrilum's long, spiky petals spiraled closed, the central spine bent, the opalescent blossom slumped gently, mimicking sleep. As did Winifred, watching the moons refracted in the glass, until the line between mimicry and reality faded.

Winifred peered through the steam rising from her mug of tea, and into Eden. Ant and Inanna had been digging since dawn, stripping the trench back to reveal the full edge of the slab. Winifred had resisted the pull, and showered, dug out a reasonably fresh pair of shorts, made toast and an egg, and got to the tent at the site just as Mort was putting on the kettle. While the water boiled and the tea steeped, they

talked about the burden of haste that had Winifred up late and Mort up early, composing messages to Aulis University, and to the project funders back on Earth, asking for help or time or both.

The risks were significant, not just to the site here, but to their careers, and to archaeology in general on Aulis. A lot of people were watching their work closely, ready to find faults of administration or science, all the while tossing obstacles their way. Half the team hadn't even made it on-planet; the group from Appleh had pulled out over the lack of local support, gone to dig on Shada IV instead. And the Earth team had started with a crew of ten laborers, local colonists shifting dirt and setting fences, only to have the town bureaucracy suddenly announce that that constituted construction, which required a permit, which had, of course, already been granted to the mining company for that particular parcel of land. A strip mine is what they had planned for it; exotic silicates and perovskites, fodder for the booming spintronics industry in orbit. So there went those ten, and the ability to excavate a significant area; they'd gone for a scattering of smaller trenches, instead, and sections in test pits, hoping to establish a clear pre-Migration stratigraphy and thus, perhaps, generate some scholarly excitement.

And it wasn't just the townsfolk; the recording team that Aulis University had promised arrived in the form of two confused undergraduates, neither with any training nor particular enthusiasm. After a month of late nights correcting garbled context records and reports laced with misspellings and inaccuracies, Mort had sent them back with polite thanks and best wishes. It was as if, John had grumbled at the time, no one wanted them to succeed, and Mort had nodded and agreed, it was exactly like that.

And now, with possibly just weeks left, they had this slab, unprecedented in the Aulan archaeological record, and if it was as large as John's muddy data suggested, then they might not have time to record and clear the recent and Migration-era phases on top of it. Let alone look under it, and that's where the prize beckoned. If it was a platform, it could cover Early Empire archaeology, which was rare, and possibly key to understanding the faded history of the *keepers*. And if it wasn't a platform, but rather the lid to something larger and deeper, then nothing like that had ever been found on Aulis. So the challenge was to show enough potential to stop the bulldozers from rolling over the site, without getting sloppy and opening themselves up to criticism of their methods. There were already mutterings along the latter lines from established figures at Aulis University, who didn't appreciate an Earther-led team, who thought that pre-Migration archaeology was a dead end, and who were, of course, funded by the pro-mining government. Their public position was in favor of deferring excavation to future archaeologists with more appropriate funding and techniques. "More appropriate politics, they mean," grumbled Winifred, and Mort just shrugged.

"It's hard to justify the importance of Aulan archaeology to people who just see the wide-open surface," he said.

"When the *keepers* themselves aren't interested," Winifred finished, and that was the real source of the frustration she felt, mixed with marvel at the improbable art and culture of the native Aulans. The aliens were blithely uninterested in their own past. Well, that wasn't entirely true, fabrilum and other artworks were kept and studied with a combination of craftsmanly interest and religious reverence. But there was no written history, no context; a sculpture hundreds of years old was treated no differently than one just completed. And there was little interest in actively seeking out the past, certainly not digging down into it; the *soil-mother* would send what she would to the surface, just as the *sky-father* had seen fit to send down the nervous, noisy humans.

Tea in hand, but no real plan beyond seeing what turned up on the edges of the slab, they were themselves pretty much relying on the *soil-mother* to provide.

And She had done so, or so Ant exclaimed, Inanna quietly brushing, but with a

vast grin on her down-turned face. They had cleared the entire edge of the slab, about three meters from sharp corner to corner, and it was covered with intricate relief, a carved garden of curling flora and fauna, with inlaid glass picking out a bloom here, an eye there. There were examples of similar inlays in the record, mostly in wood, sometimes in stone, but nothing of this scale or antiquity. And nothing this . . . "lush" was the term that came to mind, as Winifred carefully crouched down in the trench; the shapes were familiar from other, more common burial art, but they were overlaid here in riotous, joyful profusion.

"And that's not half of it," Ant said, with a flourish of his trowel. He stepped around Inanna, who stood up, grin still gleaming. They'd cleaned around the east corner of the slab, exposing a half-meter along the side, and that corner was cracked, clean across, the resulting triangle of stone slightly askew, leaving a dark gap.

"It's loose," Ant said. "We didn't lift it, though."

"It's recorded," Inanna said, "and I took extra photographs."

"Can you see through the gap?" Mort asked.

"Just dirt," Ant said, "but there's space between it and the bottom of the slab, and it looks like the ground is sloping away."

"Like a sarcophagus," Winifred said.

"Or an entrance," Ant replied.

"We'll not be doing much entering," Mort said, amused, "unless Inanna thinks she can squeeze through."

Inanna measured her hips with her hands, thin as they were, and grinned again, with a little shake of her head.

"Ah, yes, well, John thinks he has an answer to that," Ant said, a bit dubiously.

"John knows he does," said John, coming across the site trailed by Henry, the two of them laden with cases. He gestured "*here*" to the alien, and "*thanks*"; after Winifred, John was most proficient in the Aulan sign language, a dexterity he attributed to long, late hours spent with game controllers.

"Is that your SpyBot?" Winifred asked, suspiciously. "Because, if so, it doesn't work, remember?" She certainly did. They had spent, one might say wasted, days on the Argolids dig trying to get the remote controlled explorer to work. Aulis's crazed magnetic field, and the dense, strange soil, had prevented it from functioning at anything like a useful distance underground; no surprise on a planet that defied technology as basic as cellular phones.

"Nope," John replied, popping open a case and extracting a gleaming steel spider, a bit bigger than a dinner plate, studded with sensors.

"Surely looks like it," Ant rumbled; he'd been on the Argolids dig, and had at one point threatened to stomp the thing if he saw it again.

"Nope," John repeated, with a wave that Henry echoed, "This is . . . Spybot Vee Two."

Silence, broken by the susurrus of brush on stone; Inanna had started working again around the loose corner.

"Well," John continued, opening another case, and pulling out a large coil of what looked like cable, "strictly speaking, this is the Vee Two." He pulled loose an end, removed a cap, and plugged it into the spider. "Fiber optics. No more reception problems, and the fiber is light enough that the Spybot can pull about three hundred feet behind it."

Winifred puffed and grimaced at the pile of gear, foreseeing a day lost to technology and enthusiasm. But Mort rubbed his head and said, "If three hundred feet isn't enough, we'll just have to squeeze Inanna in after all. Good work, John. Let's give it a try, shall we?"

"Can you see anything?" Inanna asked, from behind Ant; there wasn't quite room

enough for all of them, clustered around John in front of the small monitor that showed the view from the SpyBot.

"Yes, wonderful things," came the reply, in unison, from John, Ant, and Mort.

"Still nothing but dirt," said Winifred.

The spider was creeping backward down the scree under the corner, the result of millennia of seepage through the cracked stone. The corner piece had lifted off easily enough; it had been a clean break, along what looked to be a natural flaw in the stone. But the opening was small, just a few handspans across, and the angle bad, and all they could see with a torch and angled heads was the dirt sloping away into the dark.

John hooked up the SpyBot, via the cable that ran from the little robot to his laptop, and sent it through a warmup of simple motions, Henry delightedly gesturing back at it. John declaring the 'Bot operational, despite Ant's grumbling, they had lowered it gently through the break in the slab, and it had begun its descent, crabbing slowly down the slope to avoid starting a small but potentially terminal avalanche.

The image shuddered suddenly, and indicators flashed on the screen. "Ah," John said, and thumbed the joysticks; the view spun, as the 'Bot took a step back up the slope and carefully turned around. There was a band across the screen, the same tan stone of the slab, and then a darker one beyond that, and another yet darker and farther, and another . . .

"It is steps!" said Inanna, who'd found a spot where she could see, looking past Winifred's shoulder and over Henry. Ant tapped an excited rhythm on the back of John's chair, and Mort muttered something decidedly unprofessorial. Winifred started to tilt her head, stopped, feeling a bit foolish, and fervently wished she could get her hands on the controls.

"Can you look up?" she asked, simultaneous with a babble of suggestions and requests from the others.

"Hold on, hold on," John said, hunched forward over the controller, which had apparently been salvaged from an ancient game console. "Let me get onto solid ground first."

The 'Bot started forward, and the view tipped sharply down, as it hung over the edge of the step. Then the indicators along the bottom of the screen went green—those were pressure sensors on the footpads, John had explained—and the camera tilted back up. The bulk of the image was dark, a deep brown, then a light bar near the top, and what had to be the bottom of the slab, acting as a ceiling. The wall was faintly visible on the right side.

"A door?" Winifred suggested. "Maybe a wooden door, something like lacquered baskwood?"

"And not rotted away?" Ant asked.

"Yeah, look see, that's the stone lintel," Mort said, pointing at the lighter strip toward the top of the screen. "How far is that in, then, John?"

"Uh, well, the door or whatever is . . . two point six meters in front of us, and we've gone about four meters, both forward and down. So the door, that should be the far end of the slab."

"And then?"

John shrugged, and set the 'Bot marching forward.

It was another ten minutes of seesawing video before the SpyBot made it down the steps to the base of the door. They had paused to examine the walls and the bottom of the slab, but they proved to be plain, if neatly dressed, stone. The door, however, was something else entirely. It was covered top to bottom in the same intricate decoration as the slab. And as they got closer, the dark surface began to glow a deep amber in the light from the 'Bot. John stopped the SpyBot at the foot of the stairs, and looked up at the door, shifting slowly from side to side. The answer was obvious, once Mort got it. "Ah, ah, remember where we are. It's glass, of course." Funny, that re-

minder of place, but useful; with the setting of stone and sharp right angles, Winifred had found herself thinking of ancient sites back on Earth, and classic tales of archaeology from when it was struggling out of the colonial adventuring of the nineteenth century to become a science.

"Well, that's it, then, ain't it? End of the line," Ant announced. "Look how tightly it's hung. We're not crawling through that crack. Nor under."

But Henry made a gesture, which Winifred caught. She laughed, a delighted chortle that surprised everyone, including herself. "Remember where we are," she repeated. "The *keepers* don't lock their doors. Henry's right. Give it a push."

John looked up at Mort, who blinked, and puffed out his cheeks, and said, "Might as well. But gently, and mind you don't scratch it."

"That glass is harder than steel," John replied, but was nonetheless careful in moving the 'Bot up to the door. He brought a foreleg up, into view.

"Here's the bit when it all shatters," Ant said. Mort rubbed his head vigorously, and opened his mouth, but it was too late; the 'Bot's footpad settled onto the surface of the door, its sensor barely shifting from the green of minimal pressure, and then the door was moving, the organic shapes embossed in its surface seeming to writhe in the shifting light, and then the door swung wide, and the far wall was visible, a floor clear of debris, a room. The door kept swinging, right out of view, and John craned the camera around, as Ant continued, "I take it back. Here's the bit where it all shatters."

But there was no awful crash from the speakers, nor flying shards, and the camera finally found the door up against the left hand wall, which seemed to be a dead end. To the right, however, the room extended into what seemed to be a long hall, stretching eastward. John marched the 'Bot out into the center and faced it down the hall. The far end was lost in darkness. Shelves and narrow tables lined the sides, in a configuration that Winifred recognized. As did Henry, if his little puff of excitement was any indication.

"It's a crafthall," Winifred said. "Where they make fabrilum. Or the same layout as one, anyway. I wish we could see onto the tables."

"I can climb one of the shelves."

But Mort said, "No, we've taken too many chances already. Let's not push our luck."

So John marched the 'Bot down the open center of the hall, its steps echoing through the speakers, stopping now again to look back at the trailing cable, and to gaze up at either side. The tables and shelves seemed to be made entirely of glass, still intact, level under the load of millennia. The glass was opalescent, close to opaque, revealing only tantalizing traces of the items lying on top. Even Mort was sucking his teeth in frustration by the time the 'Bot was halfway down the hall.

"If this is the standard crafthall configuration," Winifred said, "there will be a door at the far end, and one on either side wall. Left will be the storerooms and the rooms for the apprentices, right will be the master's workroom and chambers, and straight ahead, though an alcove, is the courtyard, a sort of cloister, the main communal area."

And her hunch about the layout seemed to be borne out, as, indeed, three doors became visible as they crept closer, richly decorated, colors shifting in the 'Bot's little spotlight, iridescent. John stopped the 'Bot between them, and spun in place, looking back down the hall, and up at each door in turn. They all looked at Mort, and Mort in turn stared at the screen, brow furrowed. After a few long breathes, he frowned.

"I'm not comfortable with trying the side doors. If this is anything like the modern crafthalls, those areas are absolute mazes of little rooms, and shelves covered with glassworks, glass shelves covered with glassworks, in this case. It's just begging for disaster, and we've had enough of that without asking on this dig."

"And straight ahead, into the courtyard?" Winifred asked. Mort looked at her, with an eyebrow raised. She knew the correct answer, the head-of-the-class answer, but this

once she didn't want to be right; she wanted to be *down there*, was the truth of it, but lacking that: "It's an open space, nothing to knock over, and if it *is* a courtyard, well, some sort of underground cloister, anyway, then it confirms the layout, shows continuity of Aulan culture. A pre-Migration *keeper* structure, maybe Early Empire. And that will knock those windbags back at Aulis University onto their arses once and for all."

"What she said," said John, and "Hear, hear," from Ant.

"Is it a vote, then?" said Mort, a little tartly.

"If it is, then I vote 'yes,'" said Inanna, all but forgotten behind them.

And then Ant leaned over and asked, "And what does Henry think? Seeing as it's his folk and all?" So Winifred translated the question, and Henry replied, a long set of signs, and then to Mort, a short and quite human nod of the head.

"Ah, don't bother, I got it," Mort said to Winifred, and then to John, "Well, there it is, then, we'll call it unanimous. Full speed ahead, Mr. Haggard, and damn the torpedoes."

John kept the 'Bot to its steady crawl, but ahead is where it went, up to the middle door.

"Uh, does it swing in or out?"

"Away from us," Winifred replied. "All the doors open in toward the courtyard. It's the center of the hall, socially, it's where they gather, where they welcome their guests."

"Well, I hope they're expecting company," John said, and tapped the controller. The 'Bot's foot came up, with a tiny click of steel on glass, then the door swung, slow and massive, revealing darkness. The image flared as the camera shifted exposure, adjusting from the bright glare of the glass to the dim space. A large space, a very large space, far beyond that of a crafthall cloister, and unexpectedly below the 'Bot; the floor was many meters down. The view shifted, tilting; John frantically tugged at the joysticks, but the 'Bot was going over. "Steps!" he spat, "no one said anything about steps!" The 'Bot hit the first step, teetered, and John shoved, got it over onto its feet, but those feet were now out over nothing but air. It hung for a second, sideways, one foot caught on the edge of the step, the spotlight shining down the hall, and the camera catching reflections, a field, a galaxy of glittering edges and faces and points flaring starlike in the beam. And then there was a flash and deep, fatal *clunk* from the speakers, and the image went black, and every indicator red.

"Uh, Houston," started John.

"Don't say it," warned Winifred.

"It's full of stars?" he ventured, and Winifred growled, just growled, and turned her back, and saw the figures lined up at the door of the tent. Townsfolk, mostly; she recognized a couple of council members, and the head of the planning commission, and several executives from the mining company, and, with a chill as sharp as that she'd just felt as the robot tumbled, she saw two, no, all three members of the Aulis University oversight committee, in the flesh, four thousand kilometers from where they should be, and not looking pleased to have come all that way.

John was beyond miserable. "I needed new drivers, software, for the serial link, the fiber, you know," he said, talking into his coffee. They were back at camp, huddled around the table in the small cabin they used as an office. Mort was wedged behind the desk, phone tucked on a shoulder, typing furiously at an email. "So, last night I chatted with Thomas back at the University, he worked on the comm system for the 'Bot, asked him if he could hook me up."

"And told him we had a major find," Winifred continued, grimly.

"No, well, yeah, I mean, all I said was that the SpyBot Vee Two was finally going to get his chance. And that there was a hole. And maybe something about the slab."

"When the one thing everyone knows about Aulan archaeology is that there aren't any big stone ruins."

"I didn't think he'd blab. He was supposed to be a friend," he trailed off, head down.

Mort look up over his glasses, phone still tucked under his ear, and said, "Loose lips sink ships."

"I don't know what that means!" John moaned, who'd spent most of his life on a station around Epsilon Eridani, then come to Aulis for post-graduate studies, had probably never seen a body of water larger than a swimming pool, and whose knowledge of history was largely garnered from old movies. Winifred suspected his education had some significant gaps in the subject of politics as well, but then again, she found that true of almost anyone not from Earth.

Though, she had to admit, the colonists had out-politicked them this time. Despite two hours of argument with the invading horde, and another few hours of Mort and her taking shifts on the satellite phone, the project was officially shut down pending further review; review that was likely to occur well after the mining crew had ripped their way through the strata, the *keepers'* legacy reduced to base silicates.

"They would have found some excuse, anyway," she said to John. "They didn't prepare all that paperwork overnight, not at the speed the municipal council works. And the oversight committee, they must have been sitting by the door with their bags packed." The University representatives had come in via suborbital shuttle, at an expense, Winifred suspected, that would have funded the entire dig for another few weeks.

"Yeah, I guess," John said, unconsoled, "but I still handed it to them wrapped up with a damn bow. The SpyBot was excuse enough. 'Possible damage due to experimental and unreliable equipment.'" Which was unreasonable; remote exploration devices were a standard part of the archaeological toolkit, common, even, in the crevices and drains of urban digs back on Earth. But they were rare here on Aulis, with its simple, shallow archaeology. And the "unreliable" was hard to argue, when the 'Bot had fallen down the stairs and was stranded somewhere inside, and the whole investigatory group there to witness.

"We all voted to go ahead," said Inanna, quietly.

"And I lifted that corner off, or there wouldn't have been anywhere to go in the first place," Ant said, not the least remorseful.

Mort raised a hand, gesturing for quiet, and said, "Yes, yes I see," a few times into the sat phone, and then, "Of course, wonderful, thank you, goodbye," thumbed the switch and set the phone down carefully, lined up square with the edge of the desk, which was not a good sign. "The Dean is still occupied, will get back to us as soon as her schedule allows, and suggests that we bring up anything urgent with the oversight committee."

"Bugger off, that means," said Ant.

"In so many words, yes. I've left messages with the APCS, and sent email to everyone I can think of back on Earth, but that will, be, what, a week each way by courier."

"Twelve days, best case," Winifred said.

"Which could be just in time," Mort said, with a trace of his usual optimism, but no one looked particularly convinced. "And I've sent a message to Frank Patil asking for legal advice about the records." That was salt in the wound, or maybe it was the other way around, and all the rest of it was just the salt; one of the contingent from town had been the sheriff, who had locked down the site; "in case of follow-up investigation toward formal charges" he'd said, and denied them access to their records, a move that had Winifred literally seeing red for a few seconds.

"Did anyone actually check the backups?" Winifred asked, a bit sharply.

"Feel free," John snapped back, with a wave toward the office computer, which also served as the dig archives. "Has anyone suddenly remembered *doing* a backup?"

"We didn't ask Henry," Mort threw in.

And Ant scowled thoughtfully and said, "We get started up again, let's put him in charge of all that tedious stuff. If he thinks watching us digging is entertaining, he'll love computers."

"Might as well put him in charge of the whole dig, then," Mort said. "Arguing with the committee, that's as tedious as it gets, yeah? And it'd be about time those chowderheads talk with the real natives." Which had everyone nodding, and settling back in their chairs, the tension let out a notch. Not accidental, Winifred thought; the two veteran archaeologists had been working together since their undergraduate days back on Earth; that was decades of experience in keeping teams from imploding.

"It's my fault," said Inanna quietly. "Last night, I was so excited about the slab, and the tablet memcard had lots of room, and then it was late and we were going into town, and I just didn't swap the card out."

"And I couldn't wait to get working on the SpyBot," said John.

"We were all excited," said Winifred, conciliatory, "and we're all overloaded. If we had the full team we were supposed to have, we'd have had someone assigned to do backups and archiving. If anyone's to blame, it's those idiots back at Aulis University."

"Back at our site, now," Ant grumbled.

"What I'm worried about," Winifred said, and looked around at Mort, "is what they might do with that data. Like lose it."

The team made shocked noises, but Mort nodded grimly. "A discovery like this, proof of an established, advanced cultural history for the natives, it's exactly what this lot doesn't want."

"And we don't have *any* evidence, do we?" Winifred pointed out. "I'll bet they come in and search the camp before long, just to make sure. It'll end up just our word, hearsay, basically. Us against them, and we're the 'them.' Every one of us from off-world, which is where they'll ship us. By the time we can find any support, and that's assuming anyone with any authority will care, this will all be a bustling strip mine."

"They can't!" said John, aghast. But Mort nodded again, and Ant glowered at the plastic wall, in the direction of the forbidden site.

"What's to stop 'em?" he asked, and no one answered.

Mort got up, creaking, and extracted himself from behind the desk. "Well, we've done what we can for now. Tea time?"

"Beer," Ant said, and on that everyone agreed.

The beer was in bottles, however, and back in camp. Winifred, Inanna, and Mort raided the fridge, and set up a picnic in the women's cabin, which doubled as storage and was largest, and arguably the neatest, of the camp's cabins. Ant persuaded John to walk down to the pub, but they returned half an hour later with another six pack and a bottle of wine from the market.

"Not so comfortable tonight," Ant had said.

"Lots of DeMitt crew in there," John had added, which was the mining company, "and out on the street, too. And bulldozers." Which they could see from the edge of camp, sitting on flatbeds down the road.

"Like those birds on Earth, what are they called?" asked Inanna.

"Vultures," Winifred said, and went back inside and poured another glass of wine.

The party, such as it was, wound down with the sun. Mort left after a few encouraging words, soon followed by John, several sheets to the wind, and then Ant, who suggested a walk. But Winifred declined, deterred by the locals in one direction and the dig, forbidden territory now, in the other. And Inanna, with her small, careful steps, had trouble keeping up with Anthony's determined stride. So Ant went by himself, with hope of finding Henry, who had disappeared soon after the arrival of the invading human horde.

Despite the beer and wine, and the long, eventful day, it was too early and too tense for sleep. So Winifred and Inanna talked, the spacer more voluble than usual between the alcohol and the frustration. The biggest problem, they agreed, was the loss of the records. If they had the video from the 'Bot, or even the still pictures of the slab, they could leak them to the press back in Tauris, the capital, where the locals, the human colonists, that was, wouldn't have such a direct motivation in opposing their work, and maybe a *keeper* elder might take interest. That would at least be enough, one would hope, to prevent any outright destruction of the site.

"We could sneak into the site," Inanna said, "there on the gorge side, where the fence is low. Into the tent and get the tablets. Or at least the memcards."

"Those guards, the deputies or whatever they were calling themselves, they're armed," Winifred said. A group of them had shown up at the camp, as Winifred had predicted, belligerent, and with a warrant. They rummaged through everything, searching for "evidence," they said vaguely, and eventually confiscated the office computer. "Bloody thugs, is what, and I've seen some of them before, in the pub. I'm sure they work for DeMitt. Anyway, if we run into one of them, well, I *really* don't like to think what they might do . . ."

That led to silence, and unpleasant thoughts, and then Inanna said, "What about my bumps?"

Winifred blinked at her, bleary and *not* following the suddenly energetic spacer.

Inanna smoothed out the blanket on her cot and quickly traced a map out of wrinkles. "Look, the slab is here, and the hall leads east, what, twenty meters?"

Winifred nodded, cautiously.

"And that courtyard, cloister, whatever, it was big, at least another twenty, thirty meters across. And you were saying there should be a complex on either side, the master's rooms and all that."

Winifred nodded again, with a sudden hunch where Inanna was going. "And those should extend the length of the cloisters, and if everything is scaled up to the same degree, they could stretch for fifteen, twenty meters on either side, north and south."

"Which means they're all through here," Inanna said, making little dimples in the blanket.

"Right under your bumps," Winifred said, and Inanna nodded excitedly, and she, who compulsively avoided big gestures, swept her arm around and poked a dent in the center of the makeshift map. "We could dig."

"Um, in plain sight of the guards?" Winifred asked.

"No, I mean now, in the dark! The ridges, I'll bet they're slabs, the roofs and such over the crafthall. It's not like the usual Aulan features; we'll know when we hit them, even in the dark."

It was a mad idea, absolutely daft, and dangerously appealing. "It's . . . vandalism," Winifred said. "We can't possibly do a proper job in the dark."

"Better to risk messing up one little spot than to let them destroy the whole site! Anyway, it's not archaeology, it's, uh, journalism. Just so we have something to show for all this."

"Something to use as leverage," said Winifred, feeling herself teetering into agreement. "If we have some proof, some photos, say, maybe we can claim to have more, scare them into thinking twice about all of this."

"And we'd have something to send off-world, out where people are sane." Which Winifred suspected meant off of any world; it was hard to take offense, under the circumstances.

"Well," Winifred said, with a look around the suddenly oppressive cabin, "'then 'twere well it were done quickly.'" She stood, gave Inanna a hand up off the bed, both of them a bit wobbly. "Do we tell the others?"

Inanna tilted her head, then shook it. "What they don't know . . ."

"Can't send them to jail," Winifred finished, and was surprised by her own cheerfulness.

As it turned out, they had to expand the conspiracy. While their cabin was well supplied with tarps, buckets, a couple of small flashlights, water, an emergency supply of beer, a measuring tape, and pads of paper—Inanna being determined to record what she could—all the shovels that weren't under lock and key were in John and Anthony's cabin. Ant was still out on his walk, but John didn't hesitate to join in the plot. "Hell, yeah," he said, and spent five minutes piecing together an all-black outfit, while the women sorted through the picks and shovels.

And then it was out the door and north toward the gorge, a worrisome route that took them past Mort's cabin and the bulldozers on the road, but there were no signs of life at either spot. There were six moons up, and the visibility was good; a bit too good, Winifred thought, and maybe John's outfit wasn't so silly after all. They circled around the site, then Inanna took the lead, following the map in her head toward the set of ridges she now thought might be the roof of the great chamber the SpyBot had discovered.

The plain beyond the site was mostly scrub, low trees, and ghostbush that twitched and quivered at their passing. Though they were all trying to move silently, only Inanna was succeeding; the dark and the uneven ground, and, Winifred admitted, the alcohol, had the other two shuffling and occasionally stumbling. So they didn't hear the sound until they were close to their goal, and Inanna suddenly gestured them to a stop. It was a quiet, determined scraping; "Not an animal, something metal," Winifred whispered.

"It's on my bump!" Inanna whispered back, indignant.

John set down his load of equipment and slithered forward before the other two could stop him, to peer past a hunched, ancient tree. At least he was almost invisible in the shadows, until, that is, he stood up with an audible snort. He waved back at them, and stepped down into the small depression that marked one side of their target ridge.

Winifred and Inanna looked at each other, and then the spacer shrugged, and, setting her pack and shovel down next to John's pile, shuffled forward. She stopped at the same tree, and made the same noise, and came back with a grin that gleamed white in the moons' light. "Here, take this," was all she would say, and handed John's pack to Winifred. Winifred followed her, baffled. The depression, and the ridge it bordered, cut a dry, parched line through the scrub; more evidence of archaeology underneath, Inanna had maintained, creating an open area several meters wide. Standing in the center were three figures, John in his black, the plump shape of a *keeper*, and . . .

"Ant?" Winifred asked.

"Bout time you got here," Ant replied. "Henry said you were on your way."

There were so many improbable layers to that statement, starting with the fact that Ant was there to make it, that Winifred just stopped, arms full of gear, her brain refusing to process. But Inanna gave her a tug, and whispered, "You're standing on the highest point. Come on." Winifred stepped down after the spacer; the depression was gentle, but with the ridge on the far side and the scrub, it provided a bit of cover.

John slapped Ant on the shoulder. "Great minds, huh? Hey, we brought beer."

"And shovels," added Inanna.

"I'll have one of each, thank you very much," Ant said. "Slow going with just the trowel." But he had already cut a narrow, clean slot half a meter into the slope of the ridge, and Henry's long twiggy fingers were dirty; it looked like he'd been clearing rocks.

The *keeper* fluttered those dirty fingers in greeting, and with a gesture to include the group, signed "*night blossoms*." On top of everything, Winifred thought, now

Henry has discovered sarcasm, and then, with a bit of a chill, remembered that night blossoms were the emblems of *keeper* burial art.

She set her armful of gear down. "We've got more than beer and shovels. We thought we'd put these tarps up as a kind of barrier between us and the site. It's not perfect camouflage, but one big solid shape is less noticeable than a bunch of moving ones."

"Makes sense," Ant said, so they spent a couple of minutes setting up a sort of lean-to on the ridge. Then Ant started back in on his slot, made much faster progress with a pick; Winifred took turns cleaning with a spade. Henry found the bucket, and to Winifred's rapidly numbing astonishment, used it to collect and clear the spoil. Meanwhile, Inanna and John made a rough plan of the area, measuring from the tree behind them, which Inanna thought she could locate on her digital plots, assuming they got access to them again.

They'd widened and deepened the slot into the ridge, stopping now and again to feel the soil, and take a quick peek with a flashlight, hoping for a cut like that surrounding the slab. During one of these breaks, Henry put a gentle hand on Winifred's shoulder, and signed "*ghostbush*," and then a quick combined motion. Winifred shook her head slowly, and grinned up at Ant, who was waiting for a translation. "It's a party," she said. "We should have brought a cake."

Ant squinted in confusion. "What's he mean, 'fat stream something'?"

"The slow stream cuts stone," she corrected, as John and Inanna, who were under the tree jotting down their measurements, suddenly sat up and looked around. "It's his name for Mort." And indeed, there was the distinguished professor himself, concealed in a sort of dark cloak that proved to be a blanket, smile and hair both gleaming white in the moons' light.

"Hello!" he said, then "hello" again, in a much quieter voice. "I've brought tea, and biscuits." Which were close enough to cake, Winifred decided, and took a couple as they huddled together in the depression.

Mort explained that he had decided to bluff his way into the office, and at least retrieve the sat phone. He'd gone looking for the team—"Didn't feel entirely comfortable going on my own; those deputy chaps were drinking, and armed," he said—and finding all of them missing, had quickly, and correctly, surmised what was up. "I'm not sure I approve," he said, after they explained their plan, "but I certainly haven't had much luck doing things by the rules. I'll just sit here and keep an eye on all of you."

But it wasn't long before he was hunched over the slot, running his fingers along what might be a cut in the soil. "Feels about the same as the other one," he said, and Ant and Winifred agreed, but nothing was visible, even in the thin light from the torch.

"Well, only one way to tell, and that's to keep digging," concluded Ant.

Inanna said, "We could do a little test pit on top of the ridge, see if we hit stone." So she and John started on that, a few meters in from where the edge might be, and using the two picks in the heavy clay, while Ant and Winifred extended the slot toward them, working carefully now, Ant reverting to his trusty trowel.

Despite the hard going, the new pit deepened quickly. While Inanna stopped to clear the bottom with her trowel, John grabbed another beer, and peered over Winifred's shoulder. "We'll hit it first," he pronounced.

"Who let him dig?" Winifred asked the group at large.

"Gently, now," added Mort.

But John gave his pick a twirl and grinned, and started in on the pit with renewed vigor. And three swings later, there was a sharp *clunk* as he hit something hard. He swung a few more times, with the same result, before Inanna could stop him. She scraped the debris from the hole, but the clay was solid, difficult to lever up.

"I got it," John said, and Inanna sat back, a bit alarmed, as he swung, and hit something solid again.

"Shhhh!" hissed Winifred.

Ant frowned, head tilted, and said, "Don't sound like stone, does it?"

John swung again, and the sound this time was more of a *crack*, startlingly loud. And then a strange creaking, that stopped and started in spurts, with a sort of keen-ing overtone that made Winifred suddenly think of winter as a child, family trips to Scotland, and gleefully stepping on puddles gone wondrously hard and slippery. "Ice?" she said, baffled.

But Mort stood, hands held up, and said, "Glass."

John stopped, mid swing, and swore. "Sorry, god, sorry, I hope I didn't break something."

But the sound was still growing, and spreading, and the dirt in front of Winifred shifted, a miniature avalanche running down the face of their slot. "Uh, guys?" she said, "I think you should come here. Carefully."

"Now," added Mort, firmly, and John took a big step back, and then another toward the edge of the ridge.

But Inanna was still on her knees, and as she got her foot under her, the ground shuddered and then *tilted*, along a line that cut through the pit. Inanna slipped, and slid into the hole, which should have been no more than knee deep, but there was a crunch and she kept going, just disappeared, and then a three meter section of the ridge was slumping after her, with a great *woomph* and a cloud of dust and debris.

"Oh God oh God," John was saying, sprawled on the edge of the depression.

In front of Winifred and Ant, the soil had miraculously parted. On the left, there was a perfect cross-section, layers of topsoil and clay, and then a long low arch of glass, thick and laced with fantastic, feathery buttresses of the same material. On the right, there was nothing; the ridge had collapsed in, a hole about three meters square, perfectly square, in fact, and sloping down into darkness.

Silence, then, except the clatter of stones and shards still dribbling down the new slope. Winifred leaned out into the gap where the end of their excavation had been, and Ant grabbed a handful of her shirt.

"Careful," he said.

"No, it's safe, there's an edge. A wall." Her hands were on stone, a sort of beam, carved to support the edge of what seemed to be a vast glass vault. Supporting that was a wall, also stone, and below that, presumably the floor of the chamber, now buried under the remains of the roof and what must be tons of dirt.

"Inanna," Winifred hissed. Then again, louder; damn the risk from the deputies, and anyway the collapse had probably been audible all the way back to camp.

There was a stir from below, maybe, but Mort and John came up behind her, their steps, and John's continuing muttered curses, drowning out the sound. Winifred gestured them still, and called again. This time there was a definite reaction, dirt shifting, and a crunch of glass. And then a quiet voice, "Huh? Yeah, um, what?"

"Are you okay?" Winifred asked.

"Tell her not to move," Mort said over her shoulder. "That slope doesn't look stable."

"Inanna, don't move, all right? You could start an avalanche."

"I'm under something. I think a shelf fell on me."

"Are you hurt?"

A long pause, and then, "Not really." Which was *not* a satisfactory answer. But before Winifred could push the point, the spacer continued, "Oh, hey, there's some cool stuff down here!" Which was a bit more reassuring, and John gasped out a sort of laugh, and finally stopped cursing.

There was a sound from nearby, and Winifred looked up, they all did, expecting a gun-toting deputy, but the ridge was empty. The tarps were gone, pulled into the room below, and they could see across the site through the scrub; there was no sign of the guards.

"I guess it's a good thing they were drinking, after all," Mort said. But the sound repeated, from a different spot on the ridge, and this time accompanied by a rattle of debris below.

Ant said, "I'm not sure about the other half of the roof here."

And from the darkness below, "The ceiling is making noises. And bits are falling off." Winifred sat back and faced the others. "We've got to get her out of there."

Ant asked, "Should she move over to the other side, get out from under that glass?"

Mort shook his head, and quietly said, "That rubble is going to slide, and push her right under."

"And it's full of glass."

"The wall's too high, even for Inanna, even if she could climb on top of the debris. And too smooth to climb."

"Speaking of glass, if the rest of the roof collapses, it's going to *explode*. She was on top of it the first time," John pointed out.

Ant folded his arms. "Well, we've got to do something." They all looked over at the hole.

"We get a rope," Winifred said. "We go to the site, and get a rope, and we pull her out, fast, keep her on top even if the rubble starts to go."

"The guards—" Mort started.

"We deal with them," said Winifred, and Ant nodded slowly.

"There's a stack of poly line by the trenches we were using for laying out the fencing," John said. "You could lift a truck with that stuff."

They all looked at Mort, and he said, "Ant's right, we've got to do something. But do take care with the guns."

Winifred leaned back over the wall. "Inanna, we're going to get a rope from the site, pull you out of there."

"The door is broken," Inanna replied.

"What?"

"There's a door, in the wall here, and the dirt's up against it, but it's broken. I think I can get through, if I clear a bit. I have my trowel."

"Thatta girl," Ant said.

"I don't think you should move," Winifred called.

"I really don't like it here," came the plaintive reply. "This thing on top of me, it's sharp."

Which brought to mind images of glass shelves hanging like guillotine blades. "Well, do what you need to do. But be careful. We'll be back with the rope as soon as we can."

"It's *me*," was the reply, which was a point; if anyone could move cautiously, it was the spacer. And, "You be careful of those deputies."

Winifred got up, dusting her hands, and said, "Okay, I'm going."

John opened his mouth, and Winifred shook her head. "It was my idea, I'll take the risk. And one person will be quieter."

"I know where the line is," John insisted.

"I'm coming," said Ant, "to sort those geezers out, if they need sorting."

Winifred looked at Mort, and he waved them all off. "I don't think we should stand around debating," he said.

So the three of them went, leaving Mort and Henry to keep Inanna company. They climbed the fence into the site, and carefully moved toward the trenches. There were lights on in the tent, but no other signs of life. True to his word, John found the rope easily. It was a bit of a tangle, though, and he and Winifred had to work at it in the dim light to get a length free, while Ant stood guard. And then, uncertain of how much they would need, they went after a second piece, John quietly cursing the la-

borders who had left the rope in a jumble. Ant grunted, and reached down to help, and then froze, they all did, as voices came from the tent. Two, no three, at least; multiple males, guttural and confused, and a single female, strangely thin, and familiar.

"It's Inanna," Winifred whispered. "How . . . ?"

But John was nodding. "Those are my speakers. She found the—" And then he leapt to his feet and was charging toward the tent. A man had come out, headed toward the little guard hut by the gate. He turned at the sound of John's steps, but too late; the tech was already midair. The two slammed to the ground, John on top. Ant started toward them, and almost ran into a second man coming out of the tent. With no evident surprise or haste, Ant swung a hand up and smacked the newcomer on the side of the head, and he dropped in a heap.

John had his man up, and was prodding him back toward the tent. Ant looked in, then gestured at Winifred. She got up, arms still full of rope, and walked toward them, eyes on the guard post.

"That's all of them," Ant said as she got close.

"There could be someone at the gate," she said.

"Best get inside, then," he said, and held the flap open. Winifred waited, however, for John and his captive. The local man was big, and there was a ferocious scowl on his heavy, red face, but John had the man's gun, and a look of cold determination.

"He was going for the land line in the guard post," John guessed. He waved the captive into the tent, and ordered him down on the ground. Ant dragged the other one in, and soon both were tied and gagged with tape from their own med kit, which Winifred tucked into her pack.

Meanwhile, John had sat at his stack of equipment, and was frantically flicking switches. They all jumped, as Inanna's voice came out of the speakers again. "Hello? I'm one of the archaeologists. I need help, I'm trapped underground."

The monitor flickered to life, image blurred, and Inanna made a startled noise. The picture swirled, then steadied.

"That's it, back on our feet," John muttered.

"The SpyBot," Winifred said. "She fixed the SpyBot."

John thumbed the controls and the view panned about, under his control again. A shape flew past, an arm, and he tracked it up to Inanna's face, pale and smudged in the 'Bot's little spotlight. "Can you hear me?" she asked, peering down at the camera. "I need help. I'm hurt."

Winifred realized with a chill that the smudges on Inanna's face were dripping, black in the LED light, but certainly blood.

The 'Bot's footpad came into view, one of the front legs, and waved.

"Oh," Inanna said, and sat back. "I know this sounds crazy, but I am trapped under the slab out there. My colleagues are out on the plain behind the site." And then with a crease of her brow, "It's not their fault! They're trying to rescue me."

John waved again, and looked up at Winifred and Ant.

"How do we talk to her?" Ant asked.

"We don't," John replied, with a helpless shrug. "It's one way. I didn't think we'd be talking to the archaeology." He fidgeted with the controls, Inanna's face bobbing on the screen as the 'Bot bounced.

Winifred pictured the SpyBot, a six-legged steel spider covered with sensors, all of them for taking in information, not sending it back out. Though it certainly was agile; John had it all but dancing yesterday, warming up, while Henry had sat in front of it, fingers flicking, as if it were a fabrilm that would respond to gesture, and . . .

"Can you use two feet at the same time?" she asked, "like this?" And she made a sign, a finger tracking up, and then all of them spread sideways over the other hand.

"Hah!" said John, and "I can try."

Winifred looked over at Ant. "A stalk in the wind," she explained. "Henry's name for Inanna."

On the screen, both front feet were now in view, and John tried the gesture, accidentally clapping the feet together on the first attempt, but the second worked a bit better, and the third was right on. As much as it could be, that was, given the lack of individual fingers, though the footpads did swivel. Inanna tilted her head, and then shook it. "Is there something wrong with the—oh! It's me! Who is that? John?"

And John raised a foot straight up, "yes," that was, and bobbed the 'Bot in a nod.

"Oh hey, are you okay? Did the guards get you?"

John snorted. "Are *we* okay?" he said, and signed "yes," then "no." Which Inanna seemed to follow; she sat back, with a look of relief.

"Thank goodness. I found the SpyBot, well, obviously. I found the cable first. Okay, *first* I got out that door. The ceiling was making cracking sounds, and sort of groaning, and Mort said that maybe the door was a good idea, after all. The shelf that was on top of me was leaning up against the door, but the door itself had broken, so I cleared the dirt away at the bottom and got it open enough to crawl through. If those shelves had come down . . ." She shuddered, and rubbed her face, then stared at her hands. "I'm bleeding," she said quietly, "I hit my head when the hole collapsed. And I cut my leg." She leaned out of frame for a second. "And that's bleeding, too, so I made a bandage once I was through the door, with my tights. I tried to call through the door to Mort, but I guess he couldn't hear me, or I couldn't hear him. So I thought, well, I guess it doesn't make much sense, but I really didn't want to be next to that door, if the ceiling went and all that glass came down. And maybe I could find the slab, and peek out, see if you guys were there. Stupid, I guess."

She stopped, and looked at her hands again. John flicked the joysticks, and the 'Bot gave a little wave, somehow reassuring, a gesture that made Winifred blink, and consider forgiving him for his earlier excesses. Inanna smiled her small smile, and echoing Winifred's thoughts, said, "John, it wasn't your fault. It was my idea to dig that pit. And who would have imagined that ridge was glass? A glass vault. It must have been beautiful." She took in a long breath. "So, anyway, I crawled down what seemed to be a corridor, with doors on one side. It was completely dark. I should have read Winifred's paper on crafthalls more carefully; maybe I would have had a better idea of where I was. Is she there?"

The 'Bot nodded, and made a little digging motion, which was not a *keeper* sign but Inanna laughed, and said, "And Ant. Hi, guys. So, I followed the corridor, and eventually it turned, and there was a door on each side. The one on the left smelled strange, musty, so I went right, and that was a big room, and the air seemed fresh. So I went that way, and after a couple of meters put my hand on something totally out of place, it wasn't stone or glass. Though I guess it was, wasn't it?"

"The fiber cable," John said.

"It was the cable for the SpyBot, so then it was just a matter of picking a direction. I picked wrong, which I figured out pretty quick; there was an opening just a meter away, and steps, and then the cable just stopped, with a little plug."

John swore.

"So I felt my way down the steps, it must be ten meters down, and there was the 'Bot at the bottom. It didn't feel broken, and after a bit I figured out how the cable plugged in. I could have followed the cable the other way, up to the slab, but . . . It was dark. I know this sounds strange, but it's never dark like that in space. I mean, everything lights up on a ship, you know? And in-system, there's a star, and out-system, there's *all* of them. I've never felt this lost." She sat up and stretched, John pan-

ning to track her face as she looked around. "But now there's your light, the 'Bot's light, I mean, and I'm here, so I should look around, huh?"

John wiggled a footpad, the sign for "no," but Inanna got up, and he spun the 'Bot, only her legs in frame, and one of them streaked dark with blood. She limped away from the camera, and down, and John sent the 'Bot after her, recklessly dropping down the steps. The light bobbed wildly, and as before, was echoed in countless reflections.

"Oh." Inanna's voice echoed. "Oh. Can you see this?" But the camera didn't have the range of the human eye, the image was blown out white on black, the pattern seemingly random.

John typed at the keyboard, and the image blinked. "Ditching the autogain," he said, and tapped at a key, the contrast coming down. Details began to emerge, shades of grey, but still nothing that made sense, apart from the form of the woman walking into the center of the space.

"They're huge," she said.

Winifred didn't understand the plural, but the room was enormous, maybe forty meters square, and lined with columns. "It is a cloister," Winifred said. "The layout is exactly that of a crafthall. Just bigger." Maybe that's what Inanna meant, she thought, the columns, the rooms, all of it huge. "Much bigger."

But as John sent the 'Bot with its readjusted camera scurrying after the spacer, the reflections that filled the open space shifted with the light, and began to trace out shapes. Shapes that loomed up to the distant, vaulted ceiling. Inanna stopped in front of one, and looked up. John stopped the 'Bot, stepped it back until the shape was in frame, the tall spacer less than half its height. With the camera and light still, the image was easier to read: a series of long, swooping glints, and a long central line of gleaming blocks, looping back on itself like a vine, or a snake's spine, or . . .

"It's one of them thingums," Ant said. "What you lot are calling dragons."

"Glasswork," said John, "a sculpture. An Early Empire 'Snip' sculpture. God, we are going to be so famous."

Inanna reached up. "It's beautiful," she said, and spread her arms wide, twirled toward the camera. "Are you getting this?"

And behind her, reflections ran riot, as the sculpture stretched, and uncoiled.

Winifred tried to interpret the change as the light moving, or the camera, but that was wrong, even if the alternative was unbelievable. "It's a *fabrilum*," she said.

On the screen, Inanna turned back to the moving sculpture. Reflected light swirled around her. She brought her arms up to her face, covering her mouth in surprise, perhaps, they couldn't see from this angle, and the fabrilum, the dragon, bent down its head, more flora than fauna, really, a bloom of sharp-edged petals and long curving spikes. The head was itself larger than the woman.

"Don't move, Inanna, you're a spacer, be still," Winifred said, despite the one-way link. But Inanna was as far from space as she could be, and working on instincts much more ancient. She jumped back, stumbling on her bad leg, and flailed her arms for balance. And the fabrilum slid forward on its coils, and the head moved forward, almost gently, the petals rising out, the spikes spreading around her. The image was baffling again, the angles didn't make sense, all glints and shadows, until Winifred realized the shadows were spreading, spilling down the spacer, because the spikes weren't around her, they were *through* her, and the dark was blood, more blood.

"No no no," Winifred said.

And John sent the 'Bot charging forward, to the rescue, which worked, maybe, in the video games. But motion was answered with motion, a flare of glass before the camera, a final crunch from the speakers, and for the second and final time that day, the screen went black.

They stood there, silent in front of the screen. Even their one conscious captive lay quiet. Maybe he had followed what was going on, or maybe he'd strangled himself,

struggling in the ropes. It didn't really matter much, Winifred thought. But after a while, minutes, or perhaps just seconds, a noise intruded, a shuffling from outside the tent. Winifred quietly turned, and went to look, because anything, be it more deputies, or a horde of townsfolk with pitchforks and torches, was better than looking at the blank monitor.

It was Mort, standing outside the tent, blinking over his glasses. "It is you," he said. "That's quite a relief. You were gone so long, you see, and Inanna isn't answering, so I thought it best to come and . . ." He trailed off, looking at her, then past her, where the others had emerged from the tent. "Oh dear," he said. "Oh dear, what's happened?"

Winifred opened her mouth, and shut it again; she had no idea where to begin, and really, no desire to do so. The only thought in her mind would make no sense to the professor, and that was, "She's in the dark; she's down there in the dark."

John stepped up next to her, and pointed, and said, "DeMitt men," which was so far from the point as to be provoking, if any provocation could possibly penetrate her blankness. But there was, indeed, a group coming through the gate, and the flood-light on the guard post picked out sticks and worse in their hands.

"What was that noise?" asked one of them, and Winifred wondered how they could have heard that crunch from the speakers. But no, they must have heard the vault collapse, all the way back in town; what seemed like days past had only been about half an hour; just time to round up a gang and come to investigate.

"And where's Paul and Janos? What have you goddamn Earthers done with them?" another demanded. Ant took a great stride forward and shoved Mort toward the tent, then headed toward the locals, a fist raised. There was a *crack*. "Glass," Winifred thought, and the darkness in her rippled a bit. But no, one of the gang had a hand raised, a gun, and Ant was stumbling, and then sitting down.

She looked at the gun; it seemed so small, and dull, and mundane, like everything else human in this place. And then she shivered, and the darkness came crashing down, and she was there again, and Ant was down, and hurt, and the gang was heading toward them, all shouting and waving their sticks. It was villagers with pitchforks, after all, she thought, bemused, but not with the blankness of before; things seemed important again, and most immediately important was getting away, finding help for Ant, and Inanna, and all of them. She turned and ran, out through the trenches, and out of the corner of her eye she caught John heading back past the tent. "Poor Mort," she thought. "They'll catch him, and he's the one who has no idea what's happened." She almost turned back, then, at the thought of the professor with that mob, but what could she do there? Try the camp, and hope that the sat phone was there, and if not, then into town, knock on random doors if she had to, until someone let her use a phone. Find the oversight committee, even; they were pompous, bigoted asses, but they wouldn't want to be associated, however incidentally, with this sort of violence.

There was a thud behind her, and angry voices; someone had tripped into one of the trenches, she thought, but there were other voices closer, and gaining. She hit the fence, and went straight up it, thankful for the muscle she'd acquired. She swung over the top and hung, looking back into the site, and one of the locals rushed out of the gloom and slammed the fence with his length of pipe. She dropped to the ground, and looked through the fence at him. He glared back, panting, his face a dark, crudely formed lump in the moonlight.

"Teach you to mess around in other people's business, you Earther bitch," he said, and hit the fence again.

"This is not your world," she replied, and was surprised at how coldly certain she sounded.

A second man ran up on the other side, who looked to be in better shape; he went straight for the fence, and the first man said, "Just shoot the bitch!" Winifred turned

and ran, into the scrub. Toward the collapsed ridge, in fact, a familiar path in the dark, and she was thinking of the pursuer who had fallen into the trench, and of the much deeper, glass-filled hole ahead.

Cassandra had risen, small and red in the East, all seven moons, now, and Winifred thought dawn was not far off. If she couldn't circle around, she was going to be trapped out on the plain, alien and obvious in the landscape. There was sudden motion to her left; a clump of ghostbush reared up and shook itself at her. And from behind, the bang and whistle of a shot, into the ghostbush, fortunately. Winifred doubled over, and slid across a series of low ridges, and almost went straight into the collapsed chamber; she skidded to a stop a meter from the edge, and realized she was on the other half of the broken vault.

Soil cascaded over the edge, shaken loose by her steps. She looked down after it, into the chamber, and Henry was there on the scree, clear in the moon's light, looking back up at her. He signed, a series of small, calm gestures, "*honors the soil*," the name she'd always found a bit embarrassing. And then a much simpler motion, but one that took her a second to parse, under the circumstances: "*jump*."

Voces in the scrub, and she ducked down; the vault creaked beneath her, and shook another small avalanche of dirt over the edge.

Henry gestured again, "*jump*." And, "*the soil-mother will provide*."

It was just too much. She was an academic, for goodness sake, a student of the deep, still layers of the past, of individual actions compressed into abstract, anonymous strata. What on Earth was she doing here, part of the action herself, and every option dangerous, potentially fatal?

"Henry," she hissed, more frustrated than anything else. But that wasn't his name, that was what the team had dubbed him; fair enough, as *keeper* names were granted when they came of age, as much description, or title, as name. And standing there, arms raised, in a chamber his people had built eight thousand years ago, when humans were still working on setting one stone on top of another, he wasn't a Carter or Schliemann or Jones; he was this: a palm held flat, and two fingers set lightly on it, the name he'd chosen, or had been chosen for him by an elder: "*waiting*." Frustration was a human thing, a product of haste and desire. The *keepers* had what they wanted, and most of all they had patience.

Which the men in the scrub behind her lacked; their voices were getting louder, both angrier and decidedly closer. But nothing in those voices was of any interest to her, was in any way meaningful, not in the context of that open chamber, and the figure standing in it.

She stood up smoothly, and kept going, out and over the edge. She hit the slope, which immediately started to slide, but the alien was already moving, leading her down, skating over the debris. The door Inanna had opened was a dark gap in the wall in front of her, just a meter square at floor level, and surrounded on all sides by razor-edged reflections, which must be the remains of the shelving. Henry squatted down and slid through the opening, and Winifred, ankle-deep in fast-moving rubble, curled into a ball and hoped to hit the gap and not impale herself on the shelves. She bumped hard against something, with a crunch, and spun and nearly went over backward, but gentle hands caught her, pulled her back. There was a crash, and debris hit her legs like shrapnel, as the avalanche of soil and glass smashed into the door.

The impact went on and on, as the shelves and maybe even the door collapsed, eventually tailing off into echoes and darkness. Henry placed something in her hand, metal and plastic and familiar; she thumbed the switch, and the torch came on, shockingly bright. The door at the end of the corridor, a slab of thick, ornate glass, was off its hinges but pinned in the opening. Debris spilled under all the way to their feet, soil and rock but mostly great shards and slivers of glass. Winifred checked her-

self, certain of finding some terrible injury, but there were only scratches; her jeans and boots had caught the worst of it. Incredibly, she still had her pack, which had not been properly on, just slung over a shoulder, and the med kit was in it.

But that brought a new, urgent thought to mind. "*a stalk in the wind, lost,*" she signed, awkward with the torch. Inanna was down here, and hurt, a desperate hope, that the spacer was just hurt. And she added, "*a hall of giant fabrilum,*" which she wasn't sure made sense, not on any level. But Henry nodded, human-style, and set off down the corridor, as if quite certain where he was.

The corridor crooked a bit, and was lined with cubbyholes and niches, and ended with doors open left and right, as Inanna had described; they were in the master's wing of this ancient, oversized crafthall, and the door to the left must be the master's sanctum, where the fabrilum were finished. That was hard to resist, with its promise of ancient wonders, and long-lost technology. But Henry and Winifred went right, into the long workhall, with its lining of tables and shelves. There was glass stacked everywhere, great petals and horns and long, articulated bones. And along a series of tables, black shapes writhed and turned to the light; varitropes, some as long as a body. Alive, or at least active, but Winifred had already conceded the fact of their survival, in light of things far more extraordinary.

And then they turned right again, and stopped at the head of the steps, and the extraordinary was before them. The cloister looked larger than it had in the 'Bot's camera, cathedral-like, long steps down and a high vault overhead, and everywhere the glittering garden of fabrilum, every shape she'd ever seen in keeper art, none smaller than a human, and some coiled, hulking up to the roof.

Inanna was a small dull curl on the floor, a dozen paces from the bottom of the steps. Over her loomed the dragon, looking less animal and more like an intricate, impossible bloom, but alive, and awake, and rearing up in the light, head level with them at the top of the steps.

Winifred froze, and wished the light off, but was afraid to make any change without understanding the design, the controlling logic that had gone into building the great fabrilum, millennia ago.

Henry glided down the steps and across the floor, and stood over the crumpled spacer. The fabrilum, the dragon, curled over to follow him, the long, wicked spikes splayed out over the alien's head. Winifred felt lightheaded; she wasn't breathing, she realized, fearing even that small motion.

Henry reached up, a long series of gestures, a sort of dance, and none of it familiar to Winifred. But the dragon responded, the matrix of varitropes reacting to heat and motion and whatever else had been specified by its designer, and it coiled back on itself, curled down to rest its closed head/blossom on its body.

Henry looked up at her, signed something she couldn't follow, but she got the point. She took a long, deep breath, and ran down the steps. Inanna was curled on her side, all but under the dragon, reflections shifting across her crumpled form as Winifred approached. The pool of blood was too big to reach over; Winifred had to step into it, though it felt somehow indecent, an invasion of Inanna's person. She knelt, and hesitated, uncertain about moving the body, but that was for spinal injuries, not stabbings, and regardless, Inanna couldn't stay there, under those menacing coils. Lifting her was difficult; she was too limp and slippery, though Winifred tried to ignore both facts. The spacer was surprisingly light, not a happy thought either; Winifred dragged her to the base of the steps, and laid her flat.

She couldn't feel a pulse, or maybe there was something, thin and irregular, but Inanna was still warm, and despite all the blood, there wasn't any obvious active bleeding. That might not be a good sign, she thought, and dug out the med kit. There was an autotransfuser, a pouch of blood substitute attached to a needle and a small

pump, and she hooked that up. And an emergency cardiac device, a complicated set of pads and cables that led back to a tablet; she followed the instructions as well as she could in the light from the torch, and the tablet lighted up, red and yellow, and a flashing warning to stand clear of the victim. An alarm beeped, and Inanna quivered, repeatedly, and then lay there, as still as before. The warning on the tablet went away, for good or bad, so Winnifred bound the wounds she could see, with bandages from the kit, and the remains of Inanna's tights, and finally strips from her own shirt.

She had been vaguely aware of motion behind her, Henry moving about the chamber, and sounds, not just the near silent padding of the alien, but a creak and scrape, the now familiar combination of glass on stone. She rested her hand on Inanna's forehead, which was smooth and still, and not cool to the touch, she insisted to herself. She set the torch upright by the spacer's head; the fuel cell would keep it lighted, and the dark at bay, for years, and then she unthought that thought. There was nothing more to do, then, no excuse to stay bent there on the ground, so she stood up, and turned around.

Winnifred had been expecting to find the dragon looming over her. But it was still resting on its heavy coils, dormant. Everywhere else, though, there was movement. Henry was moving from one fabrilum to the next, a different, complex dance of signs for each one, and one by one they awoke, and slid forward on stalks, or rows of thorns, or long, spiked legs.

She watched, arms folded against chill and wonder, as Henry worked his way back to her, the last of the ancient glassworks awoken. She felt somehow bashful in the alien's presence, for all the last year of their acquaintance; and her gestures felt clumsy and childish after the dance she'd just witnessed.

"here was known to you?" she signed, not quite grammatical.

"seeds given the soil-mother long ago, before our sad restlessness," the alien replied, his motions still carrying the grace of his wakening dance; Winnifred suspected that he had been simplifying his signs for her before, a sort of baby-talk.

"the gestures known to you. you-waiting"

And he signed yes, and "waiting," which was his name, or maybe his title; how wrong they'd all been, the archaeologists as much as the colonists, in thinking the Aulans had no legacy, or no interest in one. What had seemed a shallow, ephemeral existence, barely touching their own world, had been something else, something deeper, some hidden knowledge or wisdom. But those were still human words, and concepts, and probably wrong again. She repeated the only *keeper* sign she knew that applied.

"waiting"

And the alien nodded, a purely human gesture, and turned, and walked into the center of the room. Winnifred followed, skirting the pool of blood, and the little tangle of metal that was all that remained of the 'Bot.

The alien swirled through one of the dances, and the dragon uncoiled, bowed down, the lethal bloom of its head set on the ground before her. She stopped still, waiting for the long curved spines. But the touch that came was gentle, and warm. Henry took her hand and led her forward, and they stepped up, onto the coils; there was a smooth curve behind the head, the first great vertebra forming a sort of saddle, and he sat her there, and showed her where her feet could set against two of the outer spikes. It was a bit cramped, scaled to shorter *keeper* legs, but she fit. And then he stepped down, and made a gesture, and the dragon reared under her, until she hung just under the intricate vaulting of the roof.

Far below, Henry whirled and waved, and the fabrilum shifted and shuffled around him. Then he mounted a low, spidery shape, a tangle of limbs around a central shaft, like a sketch in glass of a ghostbush, she realized. And then they were moving forward, toward the rear of the chamber; there was a great arch there, and a hall that angled off and up.

Winifred looked back, at Inanna lying in the little pool of light. And around at the strange procession; as they moved into the dim hall, all that was left visible was the glint of edges and points. An army, she thought, and imagined the townsfolk with their sticks and pipes and dull little guns. She shook her head—because it was an army of glass, after all—and suddenly feared the dragon would react in kind, and fling her off, but it kept to its steady progress, her seat barely swaying as it coiled forward.

"Army" was, of course, the wrong concept, a human concept. She, of all people, perhaps, literally, of all humans, could see a glimmer of the truth in that alien dark.

When she had come to Aulis for the first time, during her graduate studies, and visited the crafthall, the first human to have done so, and the cumulation of years of patient inquiry, she had sat in the cloister, with the master. The cloister had been nothing like the great hall she had just left, of course; it was a comfortable, open space, with neat gardens of herbs and flowers, and a well from which they had drawn water. She had asked her questions, with carefully rehearsed gestures, and the master had replied, some of his signs beyond her level, but she was vidding, and would have another year or two of work on her thesis in which to decipher them. And then the master had questioned her, a few polite queries about her intentions with this strange digging she intended. After which, he gestured to an apprentice, a confusing sequence until she realized that "*honors the soil*" referred to her. And that surprise had been overwhelmed by what followed; the apprentice bringing out the little fabrilum, and the master showing her the gestures that made it unfold, and track her finger, or follow the sun, or curl back into repose, and the realization that it was hers, a gift to take, like the name.

She had expressed her gratitude and excitement with every sign she knew, the *keeper* gracious in turn, and no doubt amused. There were too many questions to ask, and all of them suddenly personal, but the apprentice had opened the door, and the master was rising, so she went with the one that couldn't be answered by study, or digging. "*why do you make them?*" she signed, and the master looked at her, a long quiet regard, and she felt herself flush. Then he made a gesture that was uniquely Aulan, "*existence*," some scholars translated, and others related to the Zen "*mu*," a nonsense word that unasked the question. But from this new vantage, as the hall turned and the procession moved through the darkness, Winifred had a better translation: "That they might be." The spikes and edges weren't weapons; what had happened to Inanna had been an accident, a mistake in translation, not the first casualty at the interface between cultures. The shapes were there to catch the light, to be beautiful, nothing more. And that was enough, enough for the *keepers*, certainly, and, she thought, enough for the humans; if the archaeologists' recordings of the slab had been sufficient to threaten the mining project, then this incredible procession would surely stop it dead, at least long enough for debate, and for a new assessment of the aliens, their legacy, *their world*.

The movement stopped. She hung there, in darkness. And then there was a huge groaning, and a line of light above; the dragon's great head before her flashed in blinding refraction. The ceiling had split; two long sections levered up and out by huge ropes of varitropic fiber; dirt cascaded away as the sections tilted, letting sun through the glass vaults for the first time in millennia. This is what a seed feels like, Winifred thought.

The hall ramped up. The spidery bush-shape moved forward, stepped off the ramp and onto the plain. The alien stood up astride it, and made a sign, "*the union of soil and sky*," which meant "glass," or in a different context, "*the marriage of the soil-mother and the sky-father*." The procession stirred, and moved forward; in the sunlight, they were almost too brilliant to see. Winifred rode into that light, and the dragon coiled out of the dark like a thousand suns beneath her. ○

Molly Gloss is the author of *Wild Life*, a James Tiptree, Jr. Award winner, *The Dazzle of Day*, a New York Times Notable Book as well as winner of the PEN West Fiction Prize, "Lambing Season" (*Asimov's*, July 2002), a Hugo and Nebula nominee, and several other novels and stories including most recently *The Hearts of Horses*. She lives in Portland, Oregon. Her beautifully told new tale poignantly depicts how often life can be derailed by the . . .

UNFORESEEN

Molly Gloss

It was one of those stucco bungalows over in the hilly part of Los Feliz, a narrow street with a high bank on one side and houses built down the slope on the other side so their roofs were not very much above road level. This house was on the high side, perched above the street with a long reach of stone steps climbing up from the sidewalk to the porch. Steep yard overgrown with flowers. Italian cypresses along the edge of the porch trimmed short and chunky to make a hedgerow. A fence along the sidewalk with a gate and a coded lock to keep out rapists and burglars but the fence no more than six feet high and charmingly made of wood; any serious burglar or rapist would have been over that fence quicker than sin, it wouldn't have stopped anybody except maybe slacker pot-heads cruising around looking for an open door and a helpful note tacked to the jamb, *jewelry in the bottom drawer under the T-shirts*.

I pushed the admit button, which made a squawking sound inside the house loud enough that I could hear it clear down at the sidewalk—loud enough to wake the dead, which, yeah, is a professional joke so old it ought to be retired but I still like it, it still gets a smirk out of some people. In the right crowd. After a minute a woman said something through the speaker box, a few unintelligible words, and I said, "RDI, I'm here about your mother," which was a leap, since I didn't actually know if the garbled voice belonged to the claimant, whose name was Madison Truesdale and who had checked the box Daughter of Deceased and who was black, which I mention only because twelve or fifteen Madisons had cluttered up the rolls of every school I'd gone to since first grade, and every one of them had been white. Anyway, she clicked the lock open and I went up the steps to the porch and she swung the door wide open for me. She was maybe forty, impressively tall, her mouth more than a little bit too wide. She wore pale yellow slacks that didn't look good on her.

I said, smiling slightly, "You should have asked to see my I.D. before you let me through the gate." I was serious. You get a little paranoid about security when you do this kind of work. A fair number of the claims showing up on my desktop are violent deaths: a woman opening the door to a neatly dressed guy she doesn't know; somebody putting up a six foot wooden fence and calling it good. Not that better security would have kept Madison Truesdale's mother from being dead, but people should at least try to load the dice.

She gave me a puzzled look. "Well, I was expecting you," she said, in an aristocratic tone of you-be-damnedness.

I let it go. Really, it was her choice whether to play it safe, and anyway her house was just off that tricky Hollywood Boulevard/Sunset Boulevard intersection, which meant statistically she was way more likely to die in a car wreck than murdered by a guy jumping her fence.

I said—the standard patter, so I could later say I'd warned her up front—"The forensics report and the accident reconstruction report have both come in and been approved, but this is, I want to emphasize, still an investigation. A lot of people don't understand the somewhat narrow criteria for coverage, and the purpose of an on-site interview is to close the door on any disqualifying factors. You should know: A significant number of claims are eventually denied." I tipped up the last word of the sentence so she'd know I was asking a question.

"Of course." Her face, her tone of voice, said: *You are not talking to a thickwit.* Which probably meant that Madison Truesdale had read the CLAIMS FORM, and especially the F.A.Q. page. Unfortunately for her, the phrase *snowball's chance* was nowhere on that page.

There was a metal porch chair and a tile-top table just to one side of the door; I figured the stain on the back of the chair was blood. "Was your mother sitting here?" I asked her.

Her mother had been dead all of twenty-four hours; I wouldn't have been surprised if this question provoked some tears. But she only flattened her wide mouth, nodded, said, "Yes. In that chair."

I sat down in the chair and looked out over the tops of the pruned cypresses. I'd been wondering if there was a view from the porch, which there was, the classic L.A. view of hills thickly dotted with houses in a greenscape of palm trees, pepper trees, unpruned cypresses. Smutty sky over it all, of course; this was July, high smog season, and brush fires as usual over in Griffith Park.

"I thought you'd want to come inside and go over the claim," the woman said after a moment, frowning, but not seeming particularly unhappy with me sitting there, making myself comfortable in the chair where her mother had died. I sometimes tried to chafe them like that, just to get an early sounding of their feelings.

"Yes, sure," I said.

When I stood up, she didn't move out of the doorway to let me pass through. "I think I'd better see your I.D. first," she said, which I guess comes under the heading Better Late Than Never but if I was a serial murderer I'd have pushed my way inside the house and had her on the floor several minutes ago, and by now might have been quietly disarticulating her corpse.

"Forbes Kipfer," I said, and showed her the I.D. and waited while she studied the virtual me and then lifted her eyes and studied the biologic me.

"You don't look very happy in this photograph, Mr. Kipfer," she said when she handed it back.

I hardly knew what to say to that, but what popped out was, "It's not a happy job," which was true but not something I'd ever said to a claimant. She nodded, as if this answer didn't surprise her at all. So: Maybe not a thickwit, Madison Truesdale.

Every morning there's at least a hundred claims waiting on my desktop, twice that on Monday because they pile up over the weekend. But fuck. Fuck Monday. The first skim is easy, it's always easy. Every goddamn morning I'm denying claims for old folks who died in bed. You have to wonder what in hell people are thinking when they file a claim for their eighty-nine year old grandpa with a history of emphysema or congestive heart failure, you wonder whether anybody reads the POLICY SUMMARY

in the first place, or pays any attention to the bold print on the DECLARATIONS, EXCLUSIONS, AND SPECIAL PROVISIONS page.

Then you toss out the cancer cases—most of the deaths by illness, period, regardless of age. There are the obvious issues: If what killed you was something that couldn't be cured while you were alive, it won't suddenly become remediable when you're dead. If it was systemic, or triggered by a gene that hasn't been parsed yet, you're out of luck until the science catches up. But sometimes it's a question of SPECIFICALLY EXCEPTED PERILS. "We do not insure against loss directly or indirectly caused by, resulting from, contributed to, aggravated by, or which would not have occurred but for any of the following, blah blah blah." You're responsible for your own health, is the bottom line. Or we're all responsible in a general way, the whole country, on account of fucking up the air and water. Claims involving death from illness rarely make it past Investigation, and usually come to nothing in Dispute Resolution. Little kids, and young mothers who leave three orphans, okay, those are the hard ones. But if you're dealing for the house it's your job to deal out hands that go bust. Live with it or quit the game.

Then you weed through the accidentals and the homicides. Some of those are easy too: the gang-bangers and drug dealers making it their life's work to shoot and knife each other. The working girls who get in the line of fire, and the cops and firefighters. You throw out the idiots piloting private planes, mountain climbers, kite surfers. Everybody bites the dust sometime, but if you hurry toward it dangling from a belay or rushing into a burning building, don't expect an RD policy to come to your rescue.

After that it gets imprecise, and this is where research and experience comes into play. A standard RD policy has thirty-five pages of print so small you need a magnifier to read it, and it's full of trapdoors—densely worded sub-paragraphs or clauses a sharp investigator can cite to deny a claim. Death by homicide, you learn early on, can often be pinned to UNINSURED LOCATION—they picked the wrong neighborhood to live in, or they were driving down the wrong street—and you back it up with statistics. I hardly ever send in car crashes any more, not even the outrageously bizarre ones. A pickup truck traveling the interstate skids on a patch of oil, climbs up and over the lane abutment, T-bones a school bus traveling in the other direction, knocks the bus flying; it lands wheels-down on a two-lane county road at the only point where the road comes close to the highway and the bus then rolls into a guy out for a Sunday drive in his cherry 1963 Ford Fairlane: I sent in a claim for the Sunday driver, and Accident Reconstruction sent it back with a note saying they'd seen almost that same scenario half a dozen times. Anybody who gets into a moving vehicle is just asking to be killed, is what they said. Car, motorcycle—Christ! motorcycle!—plane, train, bicycle, there's almost always a way to deny those claims under the heading PERSONAL LIABILITY, or in some cases, ACTS, ERRORS, AND OMISSIONS.

We don't throw out everything sports related, but we try. The first time I got a claim for a minor league third base umpire hit in the neck—a foul ball crushed his artery against his spinal column and he was dead before he could think *Safe!*—I checked the box for Unforeseeable and the box for Nonhazardous Activity, and wrote what I thought was a pretty persuasive argument that umpiring minor league baseball was essentially riskless in terms of life-ending events, and this poor sap had just been standing in the wrong place at the wrong time. Half an inch in one direction or the other and the ball would have left a bruise. Couple of inches, it would have missed him entirely. Well, a message came down from a statistician in the home office: Baseballs in the neck kill two or three people every year in the minor leagues alone, not to mention college, high school, pro ball. Mr. Third Base Umpire hereinafter referred to as CLAIMANT could reasonably be expected to know bodily injury could arise from said activity, blah blah.

So by the time you throw out most of the deaths by illness, most of the accidents, and all the obvious "natural causes," you've winnowed the pile down to a small handful of deaths, mostly freakish things that maybe nobody could have foreseen or avoided. Statistical anomalies. What you're left with is people minding their own business and the sky falls on their head.

We went inside. It was the kind of poorly thought-out space you see in these old un-renovated houses, the front door dividing the room neatly into living and dining, hallway piercing the middle of the far wall, glimpse of kitchen through a doorway on the right side of the hall, glimpse of a tiny bathroom at the far end, couple of closed doors on the left side that must have been bedrooms. Los Feliz was a real estate hotbed, people bought these places, remodeled them with track lights, raised ceilings, bamboo floors, but this one looked pretty much the way it must have looked when it was built, with dusty plate-shaped light fixtures in the low ceilings, oak hardwoods with the finish worn down to dull bare wood in all the high traffic pathways. My guess: Madison Truesdale's mother had put her spare change into paying the premiums on her RD policy. If she had asked, I'd have told her to put the money into bamboo floors.

Another guess: In the day or so since her mother's death, Madison Truesdale hadn't been using the dining room for dining, if she ever had. The table was cluttered with arrangements of flowers no doubt carrying sincere expressions of sympathy, loose stacks of papers that no doubt included her mother's insurance policies, and an assortment of unrelated things that I had fun trying to fit into her story of recent grief: a new Angels baseball cap, a screwdriver and box of screws, a pump jar of skin cream for cracked heels and hands, and a cheap plastic sculpture of a horse tipped over on top of one of the piles of papers. Now that she was alone in the house maybe she was using the dining room for living and the living room for dining: there were a couple of plates with dried-on food, and glasses holding the ripe dregs of tomato juice on the coffee table in front of the sofa.

Madison didn't apologize for the clutter or make any move to pick up the dirty dishes. She gestured that I should sit down in the big recliner that took up a corner of the living room, so I perched myself on the edge of the seat and took out my notepad and stylus and a recorder; she sat down on the end of the sofa that was farthest from me.

I clicked on the recorder and smiled slightly without looking up and started with, "Madison is a very popular name," just to see where that took us.

She knew what I was getting at; I was not the first person to mention it. "It's a family name," she said drily. "My grandmother's maiden name. I was born before they started giving it to all those little white girls." She made a small dismissive sound. "If she'd known what was coming maybe my mother would have called me D'Shawna."

I smiled again. "Your mother lived here with you?" I always went over everything, including everything I already knew the answer to, because sometimes small details emerged from an interview. You were always looking for what would tip the balance.

Madison Truesdale shook her head. She was having none of it. "I'm the one who lives with her."

"Is that right? So did you grow up in this house?"

"Yes I did."

"How long ago did you move back home?"

"I left my husband at the end of April. I'm waiting for my divorce to settle so I'll have money for a down payment on my own place."

I smiled again. "I was thinking you might say you'd been here four or five years. That would almost be the cliché, wouldn't it?" I laughed. "Anyway, I guess my par-

ents were worried about it; afraid I'd move back home after my divorce and expect my mother to have dinner ready every night and start doing my laundry; afraid I'd never move back out."

She crossed her legs carelessly, looked away. "I do my own laundry and bring home take-out." I waited a bit, which is sometimes a useful tactic. Sometimes it nudges them, they don't like the silence, and then something shows up. "My mother has her own life and so do I," she said after a moment and turned her head to look at me again. She was deliberately choosing the present tense.

I waited, but so did she. Finally I said, "Can you tell me where you were when your mother died?"

"I was here. At the computer." She gestured toward a little drop-front desk in a corner of the dining room.

I said, "Would you tell me about it?"

She looked out the front window to that smudged view of the Hollywood Hills. "I heard a loud bang. Before I was married I lived in Oakland in a neighborhood where we'd hear gunshots sometimes so I knew it wasn't a gun. Or backfire, this wasn't like a backfire. I thought it was a car accident, two cars crashing into each other. That's what it sounded like. Right in front of the house. So I got up and looked out the window and saw just the one car coasting to a stop. And that's all. So I went out on the porch to ask Mother if she'd seen anything." She crossed her arms and looked right at me. "There was a piece of metal sticking out of her chest, something shaped like the handle of an umbrella, with a curve on the end."

"Was your mother conscious?"

She uncrossed her arms and made a brushing away gesture. "Oh no, no, she was already dead. I wonder if she even heard the bang."

"Did you realize this metal was from the car in the street?"

She looked at me in some surprise. "I'm fairly sure that wasn't my first thought."

"And did the people in the car realize what had happened?"

"No. Of course not. I could hear them down there in the street, upset about their car, that it had made this terrible noise and then quit running. Who would think? No, of course not."

A car throws a piece of metal off the undercarriage and it strikes a woman sitting on her porch thirty feet above the road, strikes her in her healthy heart and kills her before she has time to turn toward the sound of the bang. Who would think?

I wasn't kidding about the sky falling on your head. Here's the ad that launched our NewLife Youth Protector Policy: A man and a woman in their thirties step onto a porch very early in the morning, barely dawn, sky heartbreakingly clear, air filled with birdsong. Camera pulls back to show a big, handsomely weathered cedar shingle house, ocean front. They step off the porch, walk down through the low dunes and sawgrass onto the hard sand and set out on their morning walk. Camera follows them as they clasp hands and begin to swing their arms like kids. Back inside the house two children are asleep upstairs in separate bedrooms. Close-up of a boy's bare foot sticking out from the edge of the covers. Yellow moons and stars on a little girl's pink pajamas. In the kitchen, a couple in their sixties stirs around making coffee, oatmeal, murmuring to each other just enough so we get the message: they're the grandparents of the children upstairs; this is a family vacation. Then, jarringly, a series of edits from newsreel footage and YouTube clips: the demolished house gouting a thin column of black smoke; the stabilizer fin from the tail of an airplane rising incongruously above the wrecked roof and shattered bricks of the chimney; clumps of neighbors, some of them still in their night clothes, standing on the sidewalk staring at the house openmouthed or taking pictures with their cellphones; plastic-sheet-

covered bodies lined up on the lawn, two of them very small. Then a long shot of the young couple walking back from the far end of the beach, you see them begin to notice the smoke, see their hesitation, see them begin to hurry. Then cut to the hard pitch, the couple in close-up with the sea at their backs, the woman's hoarse plea: *Don't make the mistake of thinking, as we did, that because your children are young, Remediable Death Insurance is unnecessary or an extravagance. We'd give anything to bring back our children. And if they'd been insured, they'd be with us right now. In our arms, both of them.* Her voice breaks. The man, bleak and worn down, pulls her to his chest, looks away from the camera toward the headland at the far end of the beach. Cut to black screen, then the NewLife logo, the sound of the surf in the background.

That advert was fucking perfect.

The plane had an industry-best reliability record, had been recently inspected and serviced, the pilot had a thousand hours incident-free in single-engine fixed-gear aircraft. It was a clear day. The house was not under any regularly scheduled flight path or near any small airports; the pilot had simply decided to take his wife out that morning on a pleasure flight. The plane struck a pelican along a part of the coast where pelicans hadn't been seen in a decade, and it went down so fast there wasn't time for the pilot to finish saying *Mayday*. And the kids had died of trauma to the head and chest, their bodies not badly burned or dismembered. It was exactly the sort of thing we can't wriggle out of paying, the sort of thing I don't see more than half a dozen times in a year. Thank god they didn't have insurance.

Of course the parents wanted us to revivify their children in exchange for appearing in the ad, but that would have destroyed the point of the ad; they finally settled for an endowed foundation in the kids' names, something to do with art therapy for impoverished youth, I think.

If your mother or your uncle or your brother was suddenly struck dead and you stood to inherit their nice little estate, would you file the paperwork to bring them back to life? Or would you quietly ignore the insurance policy they'd been paying on for years, let them stay dead, and collect your inheritance? It used to surprise me, how often family members would go ahead and file an RD claim, even against their own financial self-interest. I used to think, in cases like that, love for the dead person must trump avarice. Heartwarming, if that was always true. But sometimes it would turn out the dead person had thought ahead and tried to cut off the family's options. Here's what I knew about Madison Truesdale: Her divorce settlement wouldn't buy a studio apartment in Anaheim, but she stood to inherit her mother's house free and clear. Los Feliz, with that view. Plus a little nest egg in CDs and bonds. She and her mother had no other relatives, there had been nobody holding Madison's feet to the fire, nobody to know or care if she had failed to pursue her mother's Remediable Death claim. And Madison hadn't exactly been effusive in her grief. So it was possible she and her mother weren't on the best of terms and her mother had put a coercive clause in her will, something like: *In the event of my untimely death, and in the event my daughter fails to make the RD claim, I revoke the previously stated terms of my will and give the entire of my estate and assets to charity.* I hoped for this, actually, because there were ways for the Legal Department to work that angle; ways to make Madison Truesdale a happy heir by making the RD claim go away quietly; and in that case I wouldn't have to keep looking for something to cite—a particular word or phrase in a sub-paragraph of EXCLUSIONS or PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITIES—denying Madison Truesdale's mother an expensive new life.

"Did your mother leave a will?" I asked her.

Madison gave me a dry look. "Yes, she did have a will. Were you thinking that's why I filed this claim?"

Her look should have warned me off but I missed the signal; I went ahead with the script, rolling out the words in tones of grave concern. "If there is a clause in your mother's will regarding her RD policy, you may want to get in touch with our Legal Department to discuss your options."

She fixed me with a cool and very hostile stare. "My mother was sitting on her porch reading a magazine and was killed by a piece of shrapnel from a car half a block away. She was insured for this. I insured her. I've been paying her premiums for fifteen years. There was no clause in her will. She left me her house and everything in it, without restrictions. You and your legal department can go to hell."

Okay, sometimes you have to roll over on your back and put all four feet in the air. I fixed my eyes on my hands, twisted the stylus a few times, and then tipped my chin up just enough so I could glance at her from beneath my eyebrows. "I admit, I asked the question in case you were looking for a way to withdraw the claim. I'm uncomfortable with it, but this comes up with some clients, questions of inheritance and probate. We try to let every insured know what their rights and alternatives are." I made a slight gesture with my shoulders, not quite a shrug, more a motion of embarrassed apology. "Not everyone I deal with has loving motives."

She inhaled sharply through her nose, which I thought at first was disgust, disbelief; but then she said with sudden fierce emotion, "I just want my mother back!" and she glanced away, tearing up for the first time. After a moment more she said, choked and passionate, "I love my mother! I just want your company to give me what I've paid for."

I think I let a little silence go by before saying, boilerplate double-entendre, "That's why I'm here."

You hear rumors about billionaires a hundred and fifty years old who've had their life restored three or four times, but I happen to know that's crap. People get old, their ability to regenerate tissue slows down and finally stops, even if said tissue is carefully nurtured in a green-tank and then a forcing bed. Plus, most people die of something irremediable anyway, and this is especially true after you hit seventy or so. It's what insurance companies count on. But we love those billionaire rumors; we're happy to foster them. Our advertising is all about fairness, equity, rightness. We play the class card. The resurrected people we showcase in our ads—people who had NewLife policies when they died from an unforeseen event—are welders and bus drivers and school teachers. Look, we say, it's not just the wealthy who should be able to come back from the dead. Our premiums are modest; we want to make it possible for the average man or woman on the street to afford the prohibitively expensive cost of revivification—when possible, of course. To the old question, "Who deserves to be repaired, and re-stored to life, when they've died before their time?" our answer is, "You!"

What we don't say is that the wealthy aren't bound by the limits of an insurance policy. They foot that astronomical bill themselves, which means they don't have to fear PERILS AND EXCLUSIONS even if they died skiing into a tree at Chamonix Mont-Blanc or trying to set a round-the-world record for high-altitude hot air balloons. If somebody in the family is willing to write a check, and there's sufficient healthy tissue on a fairly intact body, they're good to go. Again.

None of this is a secret, or not much of one, and you'd think by now the hoi polloi would be wise to it. You'd think they would know that most people die of something quite irremediable; that "sufficient healthy tissue on a fairly intact body" is the exception, not the rule, in cases of early death. But I guess people are still looking for a hole card, a winning lottery ticket. Or they think a Remediable Death policy somehow takes randomness, meaninglessness, out of the equation. They haven't realized yet: In this game the cards are marked. I don't know anybody in the insurance busi-

ness who owns an RD policy, and really, why would we? There's a nasty little saying in the industry: Only the rich die twice.

Madison Truesdale had surprised me with that sudden display of feeling. I'm unimpressed by the weepers and wailers, which is what I mostly run into. Or the ones who don't give a rat's ass and don't try to hide it. The dignified and private grievers, people like Madison, people holding it in, holding it together, they're like snow in August, and I'm always surprised when one turns up. Plus, I thought I had this woman pegged and now she'd thrown me off my stride.

I clicked off the recorder, which people often take as the end of the official interview. Then I settled back in the recliner and started again, dealing out just a few more questions like face cards between runs of aimless impersonal chitchat—making up for that rude business about wills and legal loopholes. There was a chance this tactic would dull her into an unexpected or careless revelation; or maybe not, and this would turn out to be a claim I could forward to the home office for payment. I asked how long her mother had lived in this house, and when she said thirty years I shook my head and smiled and told her I hadn't ever lived anywhere longer than a couple of years. Told her I used to live in Los Feliz myself, used to go to the old Liberty Theater just up the block from here, too bad they didn't still run it as an art house, nothing playing there now but Hollywood buzz bombs. She didn't seem to think any of this required a response. I said I lived over in the Valley now, the cheap edge of Thousand Oaks, brush fires pretty much all summer, which, if I stayed there—little sad smirk—probably improved my chances of dying from pulmonary issues. This time she looked away and pursed her mouth, impatient or offended. I asked, did her mother often sit out on the porch? Yes, she said, just the one word. Great view from that porch, I told her, too bad about the smoke from Griffith Park obscuring the hillside but in the winter the view must clear up, was I right about that? Which got a small acknowledgement. Finally when I said I recognized the horse on her dining room table, DaVinci's very famous clay model horse, she looked over at it and said dismissively, "That's a cheap plastic copy Mother picked up in a gift shop in Florence on her one and only trip to Europe."

I smiled. "I was in Florence two years ago, I saw a full-scale model of that horse. When was your mother there?"

She said, "I don't remember," but then turned back to me and seemed to think over the question. After a bit she said, "Eight or nine years ago. She went with her sister Drewsy. Drewsy died the next summer, an aneurism, so I guess that makes it seven years ago." After another moment, she gestured toward the front windows. "Drewsy used to help Mother keep the garden up. I had forgotten that. It's overgrown now, Mother hasn't been able to keep up with it on her own."

"I like the look of it, the wildness," I said, which was true. Then I smiled and said I wasn't in favor of the cypresses pruned along the porch—too formal for the lovely disorder of those flowers. I thought this might provoke a friendly argument, but she may have known I was playing her. Or she meant it when she said she didn't know anything about flowers, that the yard was her mother's thing. I rattled off the names of the flowers I recognized—fleabane, Catalina lilies, coreopsis—and that, I had learned the names of flowers from my mother, which was also true.

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After a silence, she said, "Is your mother still living?"

"Yes she is." I considered whether to play the next card and then I said, "I had a younger brother who died of lymphoma"—this was another true thing—"and my mother has never really recovered from it."

She looked over at me. "How old was he when he died?"

"He was twenty-eight."

She went on looking at me and then nodded as if this was information that did not surprise her in any way.

Here is the complicated thing about staring too hard at death, at the causes of death. You start to think every death *has* a cause; or rather, you start to think every death would not have occurred but for one small thing. That every death was caused by, resulted from, was contributed to, or aggravated by—something. And on the one hand this is comforting. You think, if you could just control all the factors, you'd live forever. When you can dig down and find the little misstep, the oversight, the omission, the thing that gave just enough push to start the bones rolling, you feel reassured, and you put that little thing onto your mental list of things you will never, ever do.

And on the other hand you think, fuck it, the sky could fall on my head.

I had not asked her for details about the minutes right after her mother's death. But at some point as we went on talking she simply began to tell me, how she had called down to the couple in the street, the ones with the broken-down car, because they were the only people around. She told me how they had come up to help her, and how all three of them had suddenly and at the same time and with horror realized what must have happened. She told me these were neighbors she knew, neighbors her mother knew, a young couple who smoked too much dope and stood outside late at night with their loud friends swearing and arguing. Madison's mother had come out once in the middle of the night and called down to them that she was trying to sleep, and someone among them—she didn't know if it was one of her neighbors or one of their friends—had yelled, "Fuck you, you old nigger bitch," and laughed. After that, Madison's mother usually got up from the porch and came inside the house when she heard their loud, jacked-up car pulling into the street—she was a little afraid of them, Madison thought, or she may have believed the act of getting up, going inside, was sending them a mute little message of disdain.

Madison Truesdale said, "I don't know why she didn't come in, this time. She wouldn't be dead if she'd come inside." Her eyes were so dark I couldn't see the irises, and bright with unshed tears.

I told her that she would receive a report within forty-eight hours. She asked me if I saw any reason why the claim might be denied and I said I wasn't able to comment. She offered me a lemonade and I accepted it and we talked a little bit longer about things unrelated to her mother. We talked about Oakland where she had lived for a short time and where my ex-wife now lived. It turned out we had both been to Greece, to the islands off the coast, and we talked about that, the houses so white against the bright blue of the sea and the sky.

On the way downtown I stopped at a bar and had a couple of drinks, Grey Goose and tonic, doubles. They didn't do me any good. It occurred to me I was killing a few brain cells, but alcohol, besides having a long time horizon, just fucked up your life too much; it wasn't how I'd want to go out. On the other hand, sitting there, I began to think of taking up smoking. Smoking plus living in Thousand Oaks under that cloud of dirty air might take some of the randomness out of the equation. Anyway, that's what I was thinking. O

NEXT ISSUE

JUNE ISSUE

Steven Baxter has been a powerhouse of sprawling, innovative science fiction adventure recently, and we're proud to feature another of his epic tales, this time set in the same universe as last July's "Earth II," in which interstellar settlers from our world's future colonize new planets with decidedly mixed results. You don't have to be familiar with the previous story to appreciate his latest novella, "Earth III," in which a hot-headed and desperate young couple on the run from their world's belligerent conqueror authorities join a questing savant on a dangerous adventure to the cold, lightless side of their planet in search of what will be considered blasphemy on their world: Earth III's extraterrestrial origins!

ALSO IN JUNE

Allen M. Steele returns with his latest, a tale of the colonization and exploitation of the Red Planet and the often unexpected psychological ramifications experienced by the colonists there in "The Emperor of Mars"; **Chris Beckett** pens a story that may remind you of the colorful and offbeat work of Tanith Lee or Michael Moorcock in "The Peacock Cloak,"—the omnipotent wearer of the titular cloak encounters the denizens of his perverse private world struggling by any means necessary to remake his creation into something more peaceful and appealing for themselves; **Benjamin Crowell** takes us to troubled Africa for his affecting story of a child's toy cleverly tampered with for criminal effect in "Petopia"; **Kit Reed** brings to mind the old infinite monkey theorem in her latest, "Monkey Do," in which an ill-tempered simian proves to be the *last* thing a struggling writer should rely upon to jump-start his career; **Peter Friend** describes an ill-fated "Voyage to the Moon," where unsuspecting insectoid aliens find that their world may have celestial boundaries imposed by a mysterious higher authority; and **Anna Tambour**'s Bradbury-esque *Asimov's* debut finds an expectant father and son hopefully awaiting a boarding call for "Dreadnought Neptune"!

OUR EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's Reflections battles Old Scratch in "Satan, Get Thee Hence!"; in "On the Net" **James Patrick Kelly** continues to consider "The Price of Free: Part Two"; **Peter Heck** contributes "On Books"; plus an array of poetry you're sure to enjoy. Look for our June issue on sale at your newsstand on April 6, 2010. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*—in classy and elegant paper format or those new-fangled downloadable varieties, by visiting us online at www.asimovs.com. We're also available on *Amazon.com*'s Kindle!

COMING SOON

new stories by **Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Carol Emshwiller, Robert Reed, Tom Purdom, Neal Barrett, Jr., Alan Wall, R. Neube, Ian Creasey, Don D'Ammassa, Nick Wolven, Aliette de Bodard**, and many others!

ADRIFT

Eugene Fischer

Eugene Fischer is a twenty-six-year-old author who grew up in San Antonio, Texas, and still makes his home there. Though his work has previously appeared online at *Strange Horizons*, this is his first print publication. The author tells us he clearly remembers “being eleven years old and spending an entire afternoon with the first short fiction periodical I ever read—the June 1995 issue of *Asimov’s* with James Patrick Kelly’s ‘Think Like a Dinosaur’ in it. Thirteen years later I attended the 2008 Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers’ Workshop, where Jim was one of my instructors.” Eugene began writing “Adrift” with the concept of a technology to obviate ports, but no story to tell until he found out about the deplorable situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Knowledge of the conditions in the DRC has led to his support for Women for Women International, www.womenforwomen.org, whose mandate is to help women victimized by warfare.

It wasn’t until they were underway that the fear truly hit his sisters—the fear of dying lost and in the dark. “It doesn’t have to be dark,” he told them, and dug through his bag of equipment. He spoke with the confidence of one in possession of freshly researched knowledge. “And there is no getting lost. Once we are out on the water, nothing can go wrong. When we get far enough from shore it is certain we will reach our destination.”

The first of the two new emails in Janet Candle’s inbox was from meteorology, informing her that tropical storm Harvey, supposed to be heading toward the Caribbean, had unexpectedly turned south. All of the distance vectors for cells servicing Venezuela, Guyana, and Surinam were going to have to be changed.

The second email was from Caxton. He’d experimentally emailed Janet at her work address a week ago, and when, out of habit, she answered it immediately, he started sending each of his carefully measured appeals to both of her accounts. This one was filled with the details of his yesterday and a reminder that, it being the weekend, he’d be available when she got off shift if she wanted to talk. The close read, “Lots of love, always, C.”

Their marriage was ending. Maybe it was already over. That was the point of applying for the position on Platform Beryl in the first place, wasn’t it? To put distance between them. When they were together he came home after spending his days

teaching other people's children and would have nothing for her but disappointment and frustration. At the time she had been certain that by leaving she was giving him what he wanted. But that was not how he responded. Upon learning that she had conceived of and acted on plans for their separation, his aspect transitioned almost instantly from indifference to voluble commitment. Now that their lives were seven hours out of sync, that commitment took the form of these emails. Exasperated, Janet resolved to wait until her shift was up to reply that she was too exhausted to chat.

Her phone rang. Janet answered it to hear the French-accented voice of the platform's lead technician on the other end.

"Ms. Candle? This is Henri. Could we please have the pleasure of your presence down on the maintenance deck?"

"Why? What's up, Henri?"

"A node was just brought in for service with human passengers."

Janet pushed back in her chair, turned away from her screen, put the email from her husband out of her mind. "What do you mean 'passengers'? Were they riding it?"

"It came in with a shipping container still loaded. Examination revealed that the container was breached, so we opened it to transfer the contents to a seaworthy one. Inside we found three people."

"Alive? Where are they now?"

"I put them in the break room and told them our administrator would come to speak with them soon. They speak French, but there is one who says he speaks English as well."

"Okay. Keep them there. I'm coming down."

The idea of putting oneself into a shipping container with a watertight, and therefore airtight, seal for the length of time it would take to get anywhere was insane. The idea of heading out onto the ocean in a container that was not watertight was only slightly less so. Janet left her office and headed out into the metal corridors and down three levels to the maintenance deck at the bottom of the platform, where Henri's team had already winched up the malfunctioning node. It hung above the intake bay, water still dripping from its screws. Next to the intake bay Henri stood beside a half-unloaded shipping container. Janet navigated around the stacks of white plastic tubs that the jumpsuited roustabouts were removing from it and made her way over to him. He was poking at a handheld.

"I can't associate with the container at all," he told her. "RFID's intact, but there is no wireless signal. I'm going to have to see if I can get routing data from the node." He dropped his handheld into a pocket of his coverall. "Come look at this," he said, and led her up the short flight of stairs that had been wheeled up against the container.

Evenly spaced along the length of the container's top were three holes, each easily an inch in diameter.

"It was the first thing that jumped out at me when it came into the bay," said Henri. "Never seen anything like it before. They drilled right through the casing."

"Air holes," said Janet.

"So I discovered when I found our visitors hiding inside."

"Is there anything more you can tell me about them?"

"No, no. The man, he asked questions, but I decided that this was outside of my purview. I told them you would come talk with them."

"Take me to them," said Janet.

Henri led her to the break room, where a young man and two younger girls waited. Their clothing was disheveled and sweat stained, and they smelled like people who had been living in a box for an indeterminate amount of time. They sat around the table with cloth sacks at their feet and cans of soda from the break room fridge in their hands, looking very nervous.

"I'm Janet Candle, the administrator of this facility," Janet said, sizing up her stowaways. "Let's start with who you are and where you came from."

The two girls looked at each other, and at the young man, who said something to them in a language Janet didn't know, and then stood to address her.

"Hello to you, Administrator Candle. I am Laurent Mokina, and these are my sisters, Therese and Nagaila. We are come here from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and it is our wish to ask for political asylum in this country."

The way he said it made it sound to Janet like a rehearsed speech. He stood under the fluorescent lights with glistening skin, his bravery like a fresh coat of paint. How old was he? Twenty-five? Younger?

"I'm afraid that will be impossible," said Janet, "because you are not in a country at present."

It took a moment for the meaning of her words to parse, and when they did Janet could see in the young man's face that they gave way to a new, more troubled lack of understanding.

"Do you know where you are?" she asked.

"It was my expectation that we would be in the United States."

"Well, if that is where you were heading, you didn't quite make it. You are on Platform Beryl, the South Atlantic FloatNet maintenance hub. Do you understand? You are in the middle of the ocean."

Laurent considered this, then said, "I must ask how this came to happen. I need to understand, so that I may explain to my sisters."

Janet glanced at the girls, who were watching the exchange attentively. They wore ill-fitting T-shirts and what looked like handmade skirts. Laurent wore cargo shorts and a frayed polo shirt with no buttons. He waited for her explanation, in command of himself even if he had little handle on his situation.

"Look, let's have a seat," she said, dragging a chair away from the table. "I'll explain as best I can, but I need you to answer questions for me first, okay? Basically, I need you to tell me your story. How did you end up in that container?"

"I paid very much money to have me and my sisters put in it," said Laurent. "The DRC, it is a very bad place to be. They say the war is over, but the war continues. And it is a very bad place for my sisters. There are many rapes; everywhere there are rapes. I hit open the face of one who wished to rape Nagaila with a rock. So always I am thinking about ways of leaving. Finally I hear about men who can get us to the United States, because there are machines on the ocean that will take us straight there from Africa. I asked many other people, and they say that it is true, that this is the FloatNet. So I thought, this is the best way." A look of consternation passed over his face. "I did not know that we would stop in the ocean."

"Well, normally you wouldn't. You ended up here because the node—that's what we call the machines that make up the FloatNet—the node that was carrying you broke down, and when a node breaks down, another node in the 'Net brings it here."

Laurent nodded slowly at her across the table. "I understand," he said.

"Do you have any family still in the Congo?"

"No. It is only me and my sisters."

"How old are you, Laurent?"

"I am twenty-two. Therese is sixteen, and Nagaila is twelve."

"It was Nagaila you saved from being raped?"

"Yes."

"Christ."

Setting out in a breached shipping container seemed less insane to Janet than it had before. Assuming that what Laurent was telling her was true. His sisters did

look as young as he said they were. Janet was struck by a painful awareness of the potential for corporate liability lurking within her every potential action.

"Okay," Janet stood back up, "here's what we are going to do. We have a room for visitors, and I'm going to put the three of you in it. I'm also going to send our medic by to examine you. I can't have you wandering the platform, so you will be confined to the visitors' quarters for now."

Laurent spoke to his sisters again, and the three of them rose from their seats and picked up their sacks. Before they could follow Janet from the room, Nagaila ran around her brother and said something plaintive, tapping the aluminum can in her hand against his chest. Laurent took it from her and held it up, smiling at Janet out of one side of his mouth.

"My sister would like to know if she may have one more of these."

"I don't think that should pose any serious problem," Janet said.

On the matter of the Congolese stowaways, the Distributed Automated Maritime Shipping Company's instructions for Janet were: (1) do not allow any communication between Platform Beryl personnel and members of the press, (2) report any new information in a timely fashion, and (3) sit tight until the legal status of the parties involved is determined. Janet sent a memo to all staff advising them of the situation, and the communication restrictions. She asked that anyone who could do so lend clothing to the refugees until she could requisition some for them through the FloatNet, and privately emailed Henri asking him to organize the effort. She also instructed that any unusual activity was to be promptly reported, and personnel were not to leave their accounts logged in when they stepped away from a terminal. After that, there was nothing for her to do about the visitors but wait for something new to happen.

Finding herself far more exhausted at the end of the day than she could have anticipated, she decided to load her VoIP client and call her husband.

"So the next time I'm dying to see you, all I really have to do is drive down to the beach and pack myself in a box?" Caxton said, after Janet had told her story.

"It would be a long drive to the beach. You're on the wrong coast to reach me that way any time soon. Anyway, the visitors' quarters are occupied now, so you should probably wait a while before you try it out."

"What, you don't have a room of your own there that I could stay in?"

Janet hesitated. Then, "These kids were ridiculously lucky that they made it here alive. About the only thing you can say for their method of travel is that it's maybe less dangerous than staying in a war zone."

"Well, I wasn't actually planning on trying it."

"Don't mention it to anyone, either. We were all specifically told not to contact the press, and I probably shouldn't have told you, except I just wanted someone to vent to."

"Hey, that's my job. I'm always here to be your confidant."

A green bar in the VoIP window bounced longer and shorter across Janet's screen with each word Caxton spoke. Since the last time they had talked, Caxton had changed his avatar image from the default tulip to a cropped and shrunken scan of a photo from their wedding. Though their faces were reduced to tiny smudges, Janet could easily recognize her stance, his bearing, the contrasting lights and darks in the wedding day glamour shot that she used to see every day on the mantle of the home they had, until recently, shared.

"Yes. Thank you for that," Janet said. "Anyway. It's pretty late here. I think I'm all confided out for the night."

"Of course. So, do you want to give me a call tomorrow?"

"I don't know. It depends. You may have picked up that things are even crazier than usual here right now."

"I did get that impression. But it has been, what, eight days since we last talked? Could you try to make time for me?"

"We'll see how things work out, Cax. We're under communication restrictions, there are hurricanes out there, and now, on top of it all, I have to take care of these orphans that washed up on my doorstep. That is important to me, you know."

Caxton didn't immediately respond to the sensitive subject. Janet continued to push.

"Had you forgotten that that sort of thing matters to me?"

"Come on. That isn't what we were talking about," Caxton said finally. "I don't want us to fight. All I was saying was that I wanted to hear from you. I do want to hear from you, if you aren't too busy."

"If I'm not too busy, you will."

"Okay, that's great. I love you. I hope your tomorrow is better than your today."

"Thank you. So do I."

Janet shut down the program, and Caxton's window vanished from her screen. His exaggerated enthusiasm for every scrap of her attention wasn't endearing. The artificial warmth served only to stir echoes in her mind of his previously intractable coldness. She could still hear him reciting at her, in argument after argument: "A man who raises another man's children has a Darwinian fitness of zero." Where had he first read that sentence? What convinced him that it communicated some eternal significance?

Janet logged herself out of her own computer, the first time she had done that in weeks. She left her office and headed to her room, no different from any other staff lodging on the platform, but which she was obliged to share with no one.

The next day Janet received Henri's maintenance report on the Mokinas' node. Containing suggestions of both sabotage and drug trafficking, it was probably, Janet thought, the most interesting maintenance report in Platform Beryl's history.

The first discovery was the sabotage. Once the plastic tubs and the empty bottles, pots, fruit rinds, and other waste were cleared from the damaged shipping container, it was discovered that its internal battery compartment had been opened. The battery had been dislodged and the wiring reconfigured. Broken contacts were covered with strips of vinyl tape; splices had been added to circuits. The container battery was supposed to be recharged by the node transporting it. Henri determined that the manipulation of the charging circuitry had triggered a failure condition in the node's software, causing the shutdown and request for maintenance.

The drugs were discovered after Henri got the node running again. He was able to retrieve the routing information and manifest for the shipping container. The routing information indicated that the container had been acquired by FloatNet off the coast of Angola, which was consistent with Laurent's story. The manifest indicated that the cargo was cobalt ore, which was inconsistent with the stacks of not-very-heavy plastic tubs Henri's team had unloaded. They opened one and discovered that it was filled with marijuana.

New information. Janet took a printout of the report with her to the visitors' quarters to question Laurent. He and Nagaila were listening to Therese read aloud from a French novel when Janet arrived. Henri had apparently brought it by for them the previous evening, when he had taken them the clothing. Therese was doing voices for each of the characters, affecting a squeaky exuberance when Janet entered the room.

"Sorry to interrupt," Janet said into the sober silence that followed after Therese stopped reading and the siblings gave her their attention. "I have some new questions for you, Laurent."

"Of course, Ms. Candle. I will answer for you any questions that I can."

Janet stood holding the report, suddenly uncomfortable in front of the three pairs of eyes. The girls were both on one of the room's two beds. Nagaila was sprawled on

her stomach and Therese was seated on the edge, the book closed on her index finger. Laurent was in the room's desk chair, which he had moved next to the bed.

"You know, we don't actually have to do this here," Janet said. "It's really just you I need to speak with. Why don't we talk in the commissary; that way your sisters can keep reading if they like. You can bring back food for them."

As they left the room, Laurent commented that his sisters were well used to his needing to leave them to their own devices as he pursued ways to improve their lot. That this was the first time in five days they had parted company was one more novel aspect of the scenario he had constructed for them. He shared his other observations of things that were new to him as they walked, things ranging from the architecture of the platform to learning that a woman was in charge of it. His reaction to this last didn't seem critical; he expressed it as just one of the exciting differences that showed he was somewhere new. Still, Janet didn't engage with Laurent in his ruminations, feeling her role was more properly to be collecting information than supplying it.

When they reached the commissary they both filled trays and sat facing each other across a table. Janet began to question Laurent about the details of the report.

"I did not have any idea what was inside of those boxes," he said. "Nagaila wanted to open one and look, but I told her that they belonged to people in the United States, and we should leave them alone because we did not want to cause anger before we even arrived."

"And what about the people you arranged your passage with? Did you know that they were involved with drugs of any kind?"

"They said to us only there is a container, and in it there is space for me and for my sisters, and the container will go to the United States. That is all I knew of them. That they had a container with space."

Janet wrote *claims no knowledge of drugs* in the margin of the report and flipped through the pages.

"Okay. So you didn't know about the marijuana. The other odd thing we found was that the onboard electronics of the shipping container had been altered. Someone removed and rewired the battery. Do you know anything about that?"

Laurent smiled very broadly. "Yes. I removed the battery so I could install a lamp."

Janet had been ready for him to attribute it to his drug trafficking contacts, or to claim ignorance. She did not expect him to claim credit. "You did it?"

"Yes. It was very dark inside, and this was making Nagaila and even Therese frightened."

"How were you able to do that?"

"I brought with me my tools, and of course the lamp. I had a flashlight for finding the battery compartment."

"No, I mean how is it that you knew how to take out the battery and install a lamp? Yesterday you told me that you had never heard of the FloatNet until shortly before you left your country."

"The circuit is very simple, Ms. Candle!" he said with laughter in his voice. "I am very good with circuits. For money I will wire a house for electricity, or fix a machine that is broken. I learned about circuits in Form 3 physics."

Janet's astonishment must have been evident on her face.

"This is a surprise to you! My teacher was an American in the Peace Corps. She taught me circuits, and also optics. This was very important for me."

"What do you do with optics?" Janet asked.

"Optics I do not use as much as circuits. But still it was very important. I will tell you a story: when she starts to teach us, she says of optics that it is about light and shadows. Now, all of us had heard that there was a man in a nearby village who did not have a shadow. Someone raises his hand and asks our teacher, 'What about the

man who has no shadow?" And our teacher says, 'That man is not real.' All of us wanted to know how she could say the man was not real, when she had never been to the village. She says, 'pay attention to the lesson, and you will learn.'

"She teaches us about light; about how it moves in lines. The geometry to light. This is what she teaches us. And she shows to us on the chalkboard how, if we can see the man, then it must be that he has a shadow. So the man who has no shadow cannot be seen. And the reason he cannot be seen is because he is not real!"

"This lesson was the most important one for me. She showed for me that if you understand how a small thing works, you can know very much bigger things about the world. After this I listened very closely to the lessons. Always I want to know how things work. I try to teach this lesson to my sisters as well. Always when I learn I try to explain to them."

Laurent had held Janet's gaze as he told his story, but now he broke it, picked up his fork and turned back to his food. Janet's hand hovered over the paper, looking for what to write and finding nothing. She should be writing something like *admits to sabotaging container*, but that felt like missing the point. What was the important information here? She supposed it was that packing off to sea in a breached container, consigning oneself to the FloatNet—insane, borderline suicidal—could be the act of a genuinely intelligent person. But *refugee a thoughtful man* wasn't the sort of revelation to be annotated and filed. Janet put down her pen and looked up at Laurent, who was looking back at her, brightly amused.

"I think that's great," Janet said finally. "Really. Both the lesson, and the way you take care of your sisters. And I bet Henri is going to be as surprised as I was to learn that it was you who rewired the battery."

"I am sure that I can put it back the way it was before, if you want that."

"No, that's all right. Actually, I think Henri wants to leave it the way it is until he figures out exactly how you made the node fail."

The amused sparkle left Laurent's eyes.

"The failure of the node was a result of my actions?"

"Well. Yes," Janet said. "That's what Henri thinks. The container battery is charged from the node, and something about what you did to it confused the node's software so it thought it had broken down. He's still trying to figure out exactly what happened."

"And this is why it brought us here?"

"That's right. This is where it comes to get fixed."

Laurent pushed his food away and dropped his forehead to the tabletop. He laced his long fingers together against the back of his head and said something pained and angry.

"Laurent! What are you doing?"

"It is my fault!" he said. "It is my fault that we did not get to the United States! If I had not done anything to the battery, we would not be stuck here!" He pounded the heels of his palms against the table next to his temples. "We are stranded in the ocean and it is my fault."

Janet put a hand on his strained wrist. "It's okay. There's no way you could have anticipated what would happen. Hell, Henri isn't sure exactly what *did* happen yet. You can't blame yourself."

"No. No. I did not understand what it was that I was working on, and so I broke it." Laurent abruptly stood up from the table. "I have to go back. I must tell my sisters what has happened."

Janet helped Laurent fill two trays for his sisters, entrees and desserts in about equal quantities, and escorted him back to the visitors' quarters. She didn't stick around to watch him deliver his bad news.

Later, in accordance with the instructions from her superiors, Janet composed an

email detailing the results of Henri's examination and her interview. She referred frequently to the service report as she typed. On the first page was a table of the routing information downloaded from the node, and when the realization of what that information implied hit her, it sent her running across the platform back to the Mokinias' room, report in hand. She was surprised to find Henri there, sitting very close to Therese and reciting from a volume of Nerval.

"I feel I have a duty to entertain these young ladies," he explained. "There is no one else on the platform they can talk to."

Leaving unexamined for the moment the degree to which she believed her chief technician's stated motives, she said, "Laurent, I have something else I have to ask you. How long did you expect it would take to get to America?"

Laurent was seated on the floor with his back against the wall, and still seemed weighted down by failure. "The men said that we would be in the container for less than two weeks. Maybe only one."

"I want you to look at this," said Janet, proffering the report. "This page is the routing data for your container. See here? It says, 'service priority: 4.' The lower that number is, the faster the shipment gets delivered. If this were service priority one, then for a transatlantic shipment you might have gotten there in two weeks. Maybe. But you were priority four, which is the bottom of the scale. A priority four shipment averages nine weeks to get across the Atlantic."

She could tell by the look on his face that he was processing what she was saying, and he would probably get to the conclusion she had reached on his own, given time. But she carried on and spelled it out for him.

"The men you paid to get in that container lied to you. They took your money and sent you out to die. And you would have. You and your sisters would have died, except that you rewired the battery. You didn't strand your sisters in the middle of the ocean, you saved their lives."

Janet did not call her husband that night.

She spent nearly an hour in the visitors' quarters as the Mokinias worked through multilingual waves of shock, betrayal, and relief, with Laurent and Henri alternating fluidly in the role of translator. When she finally returned to her office to resume the work she had left unfinished, there was another email from Caxton waiting for her. She chose to let it sit in her inbox, unread, until her report was complete. Then she let it sit until the following morning.

It was just a reminder of his availability to chat, but still demanded some response. She replied with a note recapitulating the events and discoveries of the previous day, which she felt were plausibly distracting enough to support her decision not to call. Now that the weekend was over there would be five days of jobs and time zones conspiring to make extended communication impractical, and the freedom of their incompatible schedules felt expansive. Liberating. Like a gasp of air after being held underwater.

It wasn't long before Janet decided there was no danger to the platform in allowing the Mokinias to leave their room. The girls were harmless, and Laurent had been nothing but accommodating. And given how many new things relevant to his interests there were to be found on Platform Beryl, it seemed cruel to keep him locked away from them. Though he could not be allowed to work with the maintenance crews—something he did express interest in—there was no reason he could not watch their activities, and ask questions.

Henri began taking all of his meals with the siblings, and Janet often joined them as well. It was still ostensibly part of her job to monitor the activities of the plat-

form's uninvited guests. And it was definitely part of her job to monitor Henri. She sought him out in the maintenance bay break room one day and said, "You are aware, I hope, that DAMSCo would frown on one of its employees creating an international incident with a sixteen-year-old refugee?"

Henri barked a laugh and shook his head, sending the graying curls at his temples bouncing. He was the longest serving member of the platform staff, and, while he deferred to her professionally, he had always treated Janet with the easy humor of a social equal. "What kind of person do you think I am? She is a lovely girl, and like a sister to me. Besides, I would never want to anger her ferocious big brother." He gave her a sly smile. "I think, if you are worried about incidents, you should be keeping an eye on him. He is keeping an eye on you, after all."

Laurent's probing curiosity had made him friends all over the platform. He asked questions of everyone. As soon as Janet received a complaint, she would have a talk with him about interaction with people who were on the clock. But no one complained. It was possible that he was cleverer about who to ask questions of and when to ask them than she feared. He often came to Janet with questions about things he had seen; questions that perhaps others could have answered just as well. But perhaps, as Henri suggested, he was seeking her out for reasons of his own. If so, Janet felt herself untroubled by it.

Once, when he asked her how big the FloatNet was, she took him to her office, sat him in front of her computer, and loaded up a map of the globe. Millions of dots representing FloatNet nodes covered the Atlantic, bunched together in some areas and sparse in others, like a great flock of birds frozen in flight. Janet pointed out the rectilinear smudges representing Platform Beryl in the south and Platform Grouper in the north. She showed him the spindly flower shapes that represented the deep water ocean thermal energy conversion installations, surrounded by dense clouds of charging nodes. She told him that each node communicated with every other; it was a network that moved information as well as physical objects. She found him suitably impressed by the enormity of it.

"It is your job to administrate how much of this?" he asked.

"Well, I'm directly responsible for this facility," she said, waving at the ceiling, "and I'm part of the routing efficiency oversight team for the whole 'Net." Janet thought for a moment. "Here, I can show you some of what I do."

She zoomed in on one of the spindly OTEC installations and drew her fingernail across the screen, pointing out a nearly straight line of nodes stretching away from it to a small island.

"This island was hit by Hurricane Louise on Thursday. We do disaster relief projects during hurricane season pretty often. Usually it's expedited routing for consumables. Food, medicine, what have you. But here the hurricane knocked out the island's power plant, which happens occasionally. So we set up what we call an ant trail. See this line of paired dots? Those are nodes carrying other nodes—just like the node that brought you here, actually. In this case they are carrying charged-up nodes from the power station so that aid workers on the island can use the batteries."

"Ah, instead of food or medicine, it is voltage that you ship," said Laurent.

"Yes, exactly. I mean, we ship food and medicine too, of course. But what they lacked was power. I just got these this morning," she said, and clicked over to an email with pictures from the island. They showed tents and awnings set up on a beach, between piles of storm debris that were still being cleared. Extension cords snaked through the sand toward the shoreline, where the outlines of a row of nodes that had been dragged up the beach could just be made out.

"This work, the ant trail, this is done as a charity?" asked Laurent.

"Depends on what you mean. This is all charity work, but the network time still

has to be paid for. There are always NGOs to partner with to finance disaster relief, though. Honestly, when an island gets hit like this I just go ahead and start setting things up and worry about the service contracts later. It would be defensible from a public relations standpoint even if we couldn't get a deal in place, though I can't imagine that ever happening."

Laurent nodded, and pressed at the floor with his heels and swiveled toward Janet. "It is very important work that you do," he said.

On that occasion, with Laurent sitting in her chair, the side of his face illuminated by the soft blue light from her screen, Janet was moved by some indulgent urge to ask him questions of her own.

"Do you believe in adoption?" she asked. He gave her a quizzical look. His skin was even darker than Caxton's, but his eyes were almost the same. She elaborated, "By that I mean, do you think it's okay to raise someone else's children as your own? Would you adopt a child?"

"I think I already have done this," he said. "Therese and Nagaila are not so old."

"But what if they weren't already family? Do you believe in it then?"

"I think," said Laurent, "that the civil war makes everyone believe in adoption."

There was still a war out there, and he and his sisters might have to return to it. There was nothing Janet could do. Eventually, somewhere far away, a consensus would coalesce at the interface of international law and corporate governance, and when it did it would sweep over the Mokinias like a storm or a wave, something too big to ever be contested.

The article was published less than a week later. "Drug Filled Coffins of the Desperate." It appeared in a weekly news magazine. The piece began with an overview of Congolese history, but the focus was on the recent development of entrepreneurial narcotics traffickers. Marijuana had long been a popular local crop—illegal, but with the general lawlessness there was no enforcement. Now, some groups had started buying up local crops and using the FloatNet to distribute them to places where the drugs were more highly valued. When they couldn't fill enough of a shipping container to make the enterprise cost effective, they would augment their income by selling "passage" to the destination country to people trying to escape what still, in many areas, amounted to a war zone. No one survived the trip. Their emaciated bodies were unceremoniously disposed of by the traffickers on the receiving end of the shipments. The article closed by relating the story of one family who had fallen for this scheme, but was lucky enough to have their container end up at one of the FloatNet maintenance hubs before they died.

The publication of the article caused a major furor within DAMSCo, as people in administrative positions tried to determine who had contacted the press. Janet's communication with her husband had come to consist exclusively of brief and impersonal emails. She had not actually spoken to Caxton since the night of the Mokinias' arrival. But in the shitstorm stirred up by the article she finally gave him a call. During their conversation there were many things said in anger, by both sides. And most of them—including Caxton's insistence that he had said nothing to anyone about the Mokinias—were true.

In fact, it turned out that no one had contacted the press. The reporters responsible had been working on the story of this black market for some time before Laurent ever became a part of it. They had already established contacts within DAMSCo by the time the news from Platform Beryl began to move through the company. On the whole, the article was an excellent piece of investigative journalism.

The spotlight of international attention that the article focused on Platform Beryl catalyzed DAMSCo's bureaucratic processes. A decision on the fate of the Mokinias was

finally handed down. The official reasoning for sending them back to the DRC was that doing otherwise would make the company complicit in an attempt to ship living cargo via the FloatNet, a serious violation of charter. The official communication informed Janet that a ship would arrive at Platform Beryl to take them home in two days.

Janet cried in her office when she got the news. Not for very long; only one tissue hit the bottom of her wastebasket before she regained her composure. Then she picked up her phone and got Henri on the line.

"Is Laurent down there with you?"

"I think so. Yes, I see him. He's chatting with Kevin. They were talking about photovoltaic trickle-charging last I was paying attention."

"Could you send him up to talk to me, please? I'm in my office."

"Oh, no," said Henri, after the barest of pauses. "They aren't going to send them back? They can't!"

"I just got word, Henri. I should be the one to tell him. Please, send him up."

When Laurent arrived he was wearing a jumpsuit and still had on a hardhat from being down on the maintenance deck. The first thing he said was, "I think you have for me some bad news."

"How could you tell?"

"Henri. He did not look very happy when he sent me to you. And you do not look very happy. We have to go back, don't we? My sisters and me?"

She nodded. "There's a boat coming to get you the day after tomorrow." Janet felt pressure starting to build behind her cheekbones, her vision starting to swim. "Laurent, I'm so sorry. In the end it was a liability thing. It's against the rules to ship live cargo, so they have to undo it. I had . . . you know I had no influence over this decision."

Laurent laced his fingers behind his head. Janet had seen him do this before, in the commissary on his second day on the platform. But this time he seemed calm and contemplative. He said, "Ever since I learned where we were, I have tried to prepare myself for this. It is not the worst way for this adventure to have ended. You told me that."

Then Janet did need another tissue. Blinking into it, she asked, "What will you do?"

"I do not know. I will have to think on it. I have learned very much. Whatever decisions I make, they will be better ones than I could have made before." He let his elbows fall, dropped his hands back to his sides. "I should go find my sisters," he said to Janet, adding, "Thank you for the kindness you have shown to us," before he left her alone in the room.

Henri arranged a small party for the siblings the next day, their last full one on the platform. It was held in the commissary. Brownies were baked, the platform's supply of cellophane-wrapped snack cakes was exhausted, and there were plenty of cans of soda for everyone, even with Nagaila in attendance. Henri prevailed upon Therese to sing for the assembled crowd, and her performance was no less charming for being haltingly delivered. Everyone applauded her when she finished, and Laurent enveloped her in a hug that nearly obscured her from view.

Janet decided that since an international incident, albeit not the one she had been worried about when she spoke with Henri, had already occurred, there was no more harm to be done. When the party ended and people began to disperse, Janet took Laurent aside and said, "I would like it if you would come see me tonight."

They met at Janet's office, and she led him to her room, which was sparse, with an organized closet; a small, clean desk; and a single, narrow bed. Janet took Laurent to the bed with her and took off her shirt. She showed him the lines on her abdomen, from the surgery for her ovarian cancer. Laurent in turn showed her the furrow on his hip. He told her of being fifteen years old, and hiding in a bush from militiamen looking to grow their ranks through kidnapping, and being struck by a bullet fired

randomly into the woods. They explored the scars with their fingertips as they shared their bodies with each other.

After, with Laurent lying with his head on her chest, Janet found herself thinking many silly thoughts. She thought about marriage and immigration. And about divorce. She was already married, after all. But if she wasn't, on how short a notice could she marry someone else? Was she like the captain of a ship? Did she have the power to declare marriages? Could ship captains even do that anymore?

She dragged the tip of her nose across his short coarse hair and breathed deeply. It was all just fluff. Idle thoughts to pass the time until the ship arrived to take Laurent and his sisters away.

The departure was a relatively subdued affair. The ship docked and Janet took the Mokinias with her to meet with its captain, a bony, cheerful man from Belarus who said that the sisters would have one room and that Laurent would have another, and assured them that the trip would be a comfortable one. "Far more comfortable than your trip here, no? We try, anyway!" His jocularity rushed fluidly to fill any empty conversational space, which was a relief to Janet, who found she had no words that felt adequate to the occasion. She hugged each of the siblings before they were led, carrying their new bags full of donated clothing, away into the ship.

After all the necessary but tedious administrative tasks were taken care of, Janet went to the observation deck at the top of the platform to watch as the ship sailed away. She found Henri already there, leaning out over the railing.

"I was surprised you didn't come to see them off," she said.

"I saw the looks on their faces when they first got out of that container," he said. "I couldn't bear to see what looks they were wearing as they got on that boat." He held his cap in his hand to keep it from blowing away, and he was facing into the wind, which might have been the cause of the streaks blown back from his eyes. "I'm going to find a way to get those girls out of there. It isn't right that they should go back. DAMSCo should offer that boy a job. I'm going to make waves about this."

Janet didn't respond. She was fantasizing about a world in which, if you could just make it to *here*, that was enough. A world where you could expect to be met halfway.

She wondered where she would be going when it was her turn to leave. ○

Martian Opal

When humans are born on Mars
Their birthstone will be
Martian opal
Hydrated silica glistening
With ancient water trapped
In the glassy stone.

They will wear their stone for luck
And to remind them that they must
Be thrifty with the colony's supply of water.

—Ruth Berman



**THEY LAUGHED AT
ME IN VIENNA, AND
AGAIN IN PRAGUE,
AND THEN IN
BELFAST, AND
DON'T FORGET
HANOI! BUT I'LL
SHOW THEM! I'LL
SHOW THEM ALL,
I TELL YOU!**

Tim McDaniel

Tim McDaniel tells us he "continues to teach English as a second language at Green River Community College, returning home at night only to sleep, write, and commune with my impressive collection of plastic dinosaurs. My new house lacks a basement, so the results of my twisted experiments are now roaming the streets." And despite the fact that his last story for us was called "The Lonesome Planet Travelers Advisory" (December 2007), Tim insists that he does NOT have an addiction to long titles.

**World Science Conference
Vienna, 1954**

"Biology, my friends! It's the *biological* sciences are the future. You may play with your hydrogen bombs and ballistic missiles, yes! And while you do—while you

have done so—I, alone in my lab, have created wonders that shall astound the world!"

Dr. Clive Crawley, the scientist on the stage, gesticulated wildly with every utterance. He limped frenziedly to one end of the platform, and then whirled about, flinging his untamed hair out in great arcs, and made for the opposite side. His white lab coat was stained, the sleeves frayed.

A man in the audience put his cupped hand alongside his mouth. His own lab coat was pristine white, his short hair neatly combed and parted and oiled. "Biology!" he shouted, laughing. "Ha! Physics, professor! Physics is king!"

Crawley stopped short in the middle of the stage and peered out of his Coke-bottle glasses until his gaze centered on the speaker.

"Oh, so it is you, Professor Jenvold! Yes, I know your work well! Playthings for babies! Babies, I tell you!"

The audience erupted in laughter and catcalls, but Crawley silenced them with an imperial gesture. "Enough!" he screamed. "Now I will astonish you with the products of my research—yes, my own research, from the long nights into forbidden explorations! I have delved into the secrets of the human cell, the protoplasm, the very stuff of life! Life! *Life*, you fools!"

Deep in the audience, among the white lab coats and bearded men, a solitary young lady sat quietly watching. The man sitting behind her surged to his feet in protest, throwing his arms up as he shouted, knocking her hat flying.

"Oh!" the young lady said.

"I believe this is yours, miss?"

She turned. "Why, yes. Thank—thank you."

The man holding her hat out to her was younger than anyone else in the room save herself. He was dressed not in a lab coat but in a smart black suit. His hair was dark and combed back, his chin was firm and his eyes, gentle and insistent, bored into hers.

He held out her hat until she took it. "Quite a show that Crawley guy is putting on up there, isn't it?" He took the seat next to her.

"Why—why, yes, I suppose it is."

"Not that he isn't entertaining. I think I saw him in some Boris Karloff movie!"

"I think it must, it must be the stoop," she said.

"Yeah, the stoop. Or the hunchback. But allow me to introduce myself. I'm Tony. Tony Graysmark."

The woman extended her hand and he took it. "Pleased to meet you, Dr. Graysmark."

He held her hand a bit longer than what was required. "Oh, I'm no doctor. Anyway, you can call me Tony," he said. "I didn't catch your name."

"Oh, yes, excuse me. I'm Molly."

"Molly! Well, that's a lovely name."

She looked down. "Not really."

He leaned closer. "How so?"

"My full name, you see. It's Molly—Cule."

"Molly Cule?" He looked mystified for a moment. "Oh, I get it! Molecule. Wow. I guess your dad is some scientist here, huh? That's quite a name he saddled you with. But I'll tell you what. I won't hold it against you."

"It's—my full name—it's actually Molly Cule . . . Crawley."

Tony's eyes swept from her to the man on the stage and back to her again. "He's your father? But—I would have thought . . . I mean, you don't have that German or Hungarian or whatever accent that he does."

"Yes." Molly looked at her father. "No one knows how he got that."

"Maybe your mother—"

"Test tube."

Tony chuckled uncertainly. "I guess I wouldn't know how that would work. I'm actually not here as a scientist," he said. "In fact, I'm here to observe, on behalf of the—"

"Behold!" Dr. Crawley shouted. He had wheeled out onto the stage an enormous metal cylinder, tapered at its far end, mounted on a tripod and studded with gauges and blinking lights. "My Anti-Senectitude Ray!" The members of the crowd variously jokingly applauded, laughed, or cried out.

"Completely safe! Completely!" the scientist continued, swiveling the gunlike contraption from side to side. "I have turned this device upon myself, and as you see—no ill effects!"

"I see it's fixed your hunchback, Professor!" came a shout.

Molly covered her eyes.

Crawley shouted, "It's congenital! Congenital, I tell you!" Then he recovered his poise and once again searched the throng through his glasses. "Ah, Doctor Helman, is it? My good friend Helman! You, too, shall see—you shall know! I shall bestow this gift upon you, in spite of your scoffing and your ridicule!" He swung the barrel of the Anti-Senectitude Ray gun toward Helman and depressed a switch. A high-pitched screeching noise issued from the machine. "I bestow it upon you—and you—all of you! Youth! Youth unending!" Crawley swayed and rocked as he cackled, swinging the gun from left to right, up and down, all over the spectators.

"That thing makes quite a noise, doesn't it?" Tony remarked to Molly. "But I don't—hey, I just felt a kind of tingle just then. Did you?"

Molly said, "I felt—something. . . ."

"I don't think it was the ray gun, though," Tony said. He gently placed a hand on Molly's. She flinched, but allowed it to remain.

Dr. Crawley was not finished. "Fools! You jeer at me, who has given you extended life! Life! But wait—I have more—incontrovertible evidence . . . You will see, you will all see. . . !"

But a somber man in a dark suit had come on stage behind the angry scientist. "Thank you for that, ah, demonstration, Dr. Crawley," he said. "Unfortunately, our time here is limited, and we have yet to hear from Professor Denavov on his groundbreaking work on the possible identification of certain elements in the sun's corona. Dr. Denavov?"

"But wait! I have more—No, no!" Two large lab assistants had come onto the stage to assist in Dr. Crawley's exit.

"I was thinking that, perhaps later, we could go out for a quiet dinner. . . ." Tony said.

"Oh, yes," Molly said. "I could use a quiet dinner."

World Science Conference Prague, 1976

"Excuse me, please." Molly Cule Crawley-Graysmark bumped her way past the knees of several scientists and found her seat. She settled into it with a sigh.

"You're late again," Tony said.

Molly sighed. "I didn't suppose you'd notice. I saw you talking to that—disco queen—in the lobby."

"Disco queen?" Molly, Debbie—I mean Dr. Carstairs—is a highly regarded particle physicist!"

"Yeah, sure. And were those particles that she was whispering in your ear about?"

Tony reddened. "That's not fair," he said. "Though I could say, it's been quite a while since *you* whispered anything in my ear. Anything more romantic than 'Don't forget to take the garbage out,' anyway?"

"Shhh," Molly said. "Dad's on stage."

"... brains, yes, *human* brains, inserted, installed into each one of these robots, ladies and gentlemen! And no ordinary human brains, no! But those of geniuses! Each one! Psychotically disturbed, granted, and murderers, of course, but still!"

Dr. Crawley gestured wildly as eight brightly polished mechanical men clomped stiffly onto the stage. Their eyes glowed redly, and antennae at the tops of their heads emitted sparks.

The crowd erupted in laughter. "I told you! I told you, see?" said someone sitting in front of Molly. "I told you this guy was hilarious. Every conference, he does something like this—pulls his mad scientist act."

Molly crossed her legs and sharply kicked the back of the speaker's chair.

"These killer cyberbots can think, yes, think! Algebra, geometry, the calculus—there is no limit, unfettered as they are by decaying human bodies, by fatigue or emotion!"

The robots swayed uncertainly, looking at one another.

"Quite a chorus line you've got there, Doctor!" someone called.

"Chorus line!" Dr. Crawley sputtered. "Chorus—How dare you! How dare—" he peered out into the audience. "Ah! Professor Jenvold, of course! Looking quite young, professor. Yet in twenty years you have not thanked, not acknowledged me, my Anti-Senectitude Ray and its effects! Helman—no gray hairs? And no gratitude!" Dr. Crawley contorted and jerked as if an electric jolt were running through him. "But you will, finally, pay! All of you! You—will—pay!"

"Did you talk to the nanny?" Tony whispered.

"You said you were going to talk to her!" Molly spat. "If you're so sure she broke the damn lamp, then fire her. Ask one of your spy friends to run her dossier or plant a camera in her belt buckle. Don't bring me into it."

"Honey, we don't discuss this in public, remember? Your father isn't the only one that I—" He shook his head. "I just thought you might want to have a say in deciding who is raising your children," he said. "My mistake."

Molly glared at him. "Are you implying that, for *one* minute—"

"Shhh. Your dad."

"Yes, pay indeed!" the angry scientist was saying. "Since the brains in these cyberbots come not from ordinary geniuses, no—but from psychotic, insane, felonious geniuses! Unhampered by your morality, they can act as they are programmed!"

"My calculator is unhampered by morality, too!" someone said, and a wave of chuckles swept through the chamber.

"That's it!" Dr. Crawley said. "Now, these cyberbots will attack and kill—yes, kill, with *lasers!*—every scientist in this room!"

He spun to face the metal men. "Now, my children! Kill! Kill! Kill the scientists!"

The robots emitted a hum that became a whine. Their eyes flashed faster and faster.

"What about the conference staff, Doctor?" Pablo Helman asked. "Are they exempt from your kill order? I'm only asking because if we ever want to hold our conference here again, they—"

Just then the whine ended, and the robots' eyes remained a steady malevolent red.

"Todd's getting old enough that he shouldn't need a nanny anymore, anyway," Tony said.

"Can we just talk about this later, please? Daddy's on stage!"

On that stage, the robots silently swung about. As one, they now faced Dr. Crawley. They raised their right arms.

"No! No, not me!" Dr. Crawley screamed. "Them! Them!" With surprising agility he darted to one side.

Eight lasers shot out of eight robot fingers, and they all converged on the spot recently occupied by Dr. Crawley, burning a small, neat hole in a curtain.

The crowd erupted in laughter.

"Fools!" Dr. Crawley shouted. He scurried to the other side of the stage. The robots turned to follow him. He leapt into the air just as eight lasers bored into the stage floor at his feet. He dashed behind the back curtain. The robots clanked off in various directions, apparently confused by this tactic.

"Anyway, I suppose your disco queen can watch over Todd, if I'm not home," Molly said.

"I understand now!" Dr. Crawley's voice was muffled, but his screeching tone easily penetrated to the far corners of the auditorium. "They attacked me—their creator—because they have been programmed to attack only scientists! Yes!"

"Oh, for pity's sake, it was an innocent conversation!" Tony said.

"But how to recognize who is a scientist? Ah! There is only one sure marker, one certain characteristic—the lab coat, yes!" One robot walked to the front of the stage, teetered for a moment on the edge, then fell clanging and clattering off the stage and onto the floor.

The watching scientists laughed their approval. "I hope that stuntman is getting a bonus!" shouted Dr. Helman.

"But I—only I—in this conference, only I am wearing the attire appropriate to a scientist! Everyone, all are in suits, or sweaters—" Dr. Crawley said. Then a robot tore down the curtain, exposing Dr. Crawley's huddled form. With a cry, he dashed off stage. The surviving robots clanked after him.

The audience applauded.

"If your conversation was so innocent, I guess you'll want to continue it," Molly said. "I'll be back at the hotel."

World Science Conference Belfast, 1996

"You remember Joe Cocker, the singer?" the man whispered to his neighbor. "Looked like a guy with some kind of severe neurological disorder, jerking back and forth. Anyway, that's what this Crawley guy does, every year. He's our unofficial comedy relief."

"We could use some laughs."

"He came on stage, unannounced, a couple of hours ago. Too bad you missed it. Oh—here he comes! Look, in a stained white lab coat and everything!"

Molly glared at the scoffer, but as the culprit was two rows down and three seats away, the inverse-square law so reduced its power that she doubted the man felt even a tingle. She directed her attention to the stage, where her father, as animated and angry as ever, wheeled out a phonebooth-sized metal box, blinking with multi-colored lights and emitting irregular hisses of steam, and then faced the audience and threw out his arms.

"Time travel, gentlemen! And ladies! It is time travel that is the future!"

"Is that an oxymoron, Doctor?" someone called out.

"Jenvold! I'll show you—I'll show all of you! I have perfected a machine—a machine, gentlemen, and ladies, that travels—through *time* itself!"

"Come on, Professor Crawley! We expect *original* material from you!" a woman called.

"Yeah!" said another audience member. "This is the same thing you served up two hours ago! Bang, the machine is there, and you stepped out and told everyone—"

"You are mad, I tell you! All completely mad!" said Crawley. "Two hours? Impossible—madness! I arrived at the conference just twenty minutes ago. Getting my ma-

chine through customs, and then the traffic—oh, gentlemen, the *traffic*—don't provoke me!"

"Molly."

Molly glanced over. Tony. She had to admit that he still looked great. But she turned her head away and answered the air.

"Tony. What, no Stephanie, or Debbie, or whatever her name was, this trip? She home doing her nails?"

"A demonstration, yes! A demonstration will convince you all! A trip I will undertake, back in time—back, I tell you, to my earlier humiliations, and after I set things right I will see you all crawl, crawl to my feet!"

"If you have to know, we've broken up," said Tony. "It's hard for her, since I still look so young, while she . . . though why you're interested is beyond me. You've had your share of bedmates since the divorce."

"At least I waited until after we separated."

"Oh, for God's sake!" said Tony. "I told you and told you, that was one little time, one tiny fling—"

"Quiet, please. Daddy's on the stage."

"This time machine is untested—untested, I tell you! No lab rats for me—I will use myself as my test subject, here and now! Before your very eyes!"

There were cheers and jeers, in equal numbers.

Dr. Crawley popped open the flimsy door of his machine and stepped inside. With a whir and a flash of light and a poof, it disappeared.

Everyone applauded.

Molly got up to leave.

"You're not staying to see him come back?" Tony asked.

"No, I'm not," Molly said. "I know what's going to happen. I tried telling him. The stupid machine can only go back in time, and the stupid thing can't go back more than one hundred and twenty minutes. I had them tow the contraption backstage. Can you make sure that they pack it up right? Daddy's been in the bar for almost two hours, now. I'm going to take him home."

She paused, looking at him. "Goodbye, Tony. It was kind of nice, after all this time, to see—well. Goodbye."

World Science Conference Hanoi, 2034

"Professor Helman! Good to see you again. Looking young and fit as ever! Are these seats free?"

"Yes, Dr. Jenvold. Please sit. I don't think you've met Lucia, my great-granddaughter, just been taken on by the Stuttgart Institute for Higher Studies. This is her first IS Conference."

"A pleasure. I'm sure you'll enjoy the next presenter, Lucia. Dr. Crawley is something of an institution himself. We oldtimers—few and far between, now, and yet it is amazing how many of us have aged so gracefully, if I may say so—we've had the pleasure of viewing his antics for a great many years. He's been quiet for over a decade, though."

"Yes, Great-grandfather has told me many stories."

Pablo Helman patted her hand. "And now you'll have one to pass along to *your* great-grandchildren."

"Oh, I think it would be asking for a bit much, to stay spry and above ground as long as you, Great-Grand."

"Nonsense, my dear! They're doing remarkable things these days with age retardants. You'll—"

"Here he comes!" said Dr. Jenvold.

Dr. Crawley limped onto the stage, impatiently gesturing at two wheezing robots, who wheeled a large circular screen into position at the scientist's side, then slunk back into the shadows.

The angry scientist faced his audience. "Thought control!" he bellowed. "The wave of the future!"

As the audience laughed and hooted Dr. Crawley's face reddened. "Fools!" he finally shouted. "You will *believe*—I will force you to do my bidding! Prepare for *mind control!*"

At a gesture, Molly, standing near the doors, started to switch off the lights. At the machine Dr. Crawley threw down a lever.

The screen lit up with patches of color: red, green, blue, and yellow. The colors began to move in lazy circles, slowly at first, then faster. They stretched from the edge of the screen to its center, swirling, pulling the gaze inward.

At the same time, the air was filled with music—a strong beat, keening electric guitars, and bubbling synthetic sounds.

"My goodness—old-fashioned rock and roll!" Dr. Jenvold said.

The swirling colors pulsed and quivered in time to the music. Dr. Crawley spoke into the microphone.

"Your minds—let them drift, and sway. Relax your defenses, all of you! Nothing to fear. It's music. Music, I tell you! Now look into the screen—yes, look deeply, and deeper still! Look, I say!"

Everyone looked. Despite themselves, they looked. The laughter died out, and the only sound was the unearthly music. The light from the screen washed waves of shifting color over blank faces.

"Yes, yes!" Crawley said. "Now, a test—a mere test! Stand up! Stand, I instruct you!"

Hundreds of people came silently to their feet.

"Yes, excellent! Excellent!" Dr. Crawley laughed. "Yes! Now—what next? Ah—money! I was going to ask for money—your funds—sent to my bank account! I brought my account number. I had it right here, right here, I tell you—"

In the back of the room, a door opened. A figure stood silhouetted by the bright light in the hall.

Molly, nearby at the light switches, said, "Must we, Tony?"

"Yes. Sorry." Tony came to her and began to turn the lights back on. "This could get out of hand."

"No, stop!" the doctor cried. "One minute, I ask it of you!" Tony and Molly paused, and the doctor returned to his spellbound audience.

"Money—I was going to ask it of you! But no—better! I have but one command, one! I demand that you *listen!*"

"And while you are listening—no *laughing!*"

Dr. Crawley paused. He looked up, spreading his arms.

"I have seen—oh, so much! My work—all in your hands!" He pointed into the audience. "You—you! Young lady! Answer me—do you have a robot?"

Lucia Helman answered, readily if woodenly. "Of course, Doctor. Who doesn't have a robot these days? I don't know what I'd do without mine. I can't even find the keys to my time machine without it."

"Tell me, young lady—the robots, the cyberbots, do they all have the brains of psychopaths?"

"Of course."

"Yes, yes! I have come to see, to notice. I don't get out much—I don't go on vacations, or watch TV—since they canceled *The Addams Family*, *The Addams Family*, I

tell you! But even I have come to see, my robots, my time machine! My ideas, my inventions, funneled to the public through middlemen, sold by corporations!

"Funneled, I say! By—my own son-in-law!"

Tony and Molly approached the stage. Dr. Crawley stretched his hands out toward the audience. "For years—years! He has watched, he has taken notes, he has downloaded my PowerPoints! My inventions—shorn of their lasers, their doomsday circuits—brought to the world!"

Molly, Tony close behind her, reached her father just in time to steady him as he grabbed his hair with both hands and threatened to fall backward. "Oh, Daddy!" she said.

"Sir, it was just—" Tony began.

"Enough!" The doctor shook himself free of Molly's embrace. "I now know—I understand! Fools, all of you! You could not follow, you could not grasp the principles, you could not stomach the consequences, and so you laughed! My inventions had to be broken down, spoonfed to you mental children! Thus is progress made! And seeing this—I, yes, I laugh! My turn!"

Dr. Crawley yanked the lever up on his machine; the music died, the colors swirled to a stop and went dead.

"I accept this!" He raised his arms dramatically. He chuckled, but only a little maniacally. "And now I tell you—I am retiring! Retiring, I say! I'm done! Farewell, fools! Farewell, I say!"

There were a few nervous chuckles.

Tony held out a hand and helped Dr. Crawley shuffle to the door. "Oh, Tony, thank you, boy," the doctor said quietly. "You know, I must tell you, I'm so glad you and Molly are back together."

"We just went through a rough patch, Daddy," Molly said.

"Are you ready to go now?" Tony asked.

Dr. Crawley stared at Tony. "Ha! Certainly!" he said. He stopped walking. "But go where?" he said. "My work is done, my colleagues are keeping a respectful silence, but the animal rights people are still picketing my lab, and my monsters—no more feedings! All loose in the wide world!"

Tony laid a comforting arm across the old man's hump. "We have a place for you," he said. "All those years, while everyone laughed at you, we in the CIA kept watch. We worked on your theories, made further developments in your technologies, and when we judged the time was right, or when the economy needed a boost, we released a little here and a little there, through respected channels. Robots, Google, time machines, pop-top cans. And now, finally, the world has been allowed to catch up with you, Doctor."

"And yet they laughed, they have laughed, and they are laughing yet! Perhaps they will continue to laugh!"

"Great men are misunderstood, and memories are short, Doctor. Let the fools laugh. We owe you a great debt, and we have a retirement home where you can stay with others who share your—enthusiasms. We have a lab there, Professor, where you can amuse yourself with the electromagnetic spectrum for as long as you'd like. And we have human brains, and even a Van de Graaff generator."

The doctor roused, looked up. "That sounds—like heaven. Yes—" His eyes regained their maniacal gleam. "Yes! Heaven, I tell you!"

"Come, Daddy. They need to bring out the next speaker."

"Yes, let's go."

As they led the old man off the stage, the audience came to its feet and applauded.

"Well, we lost another one," said Dr. Jenvold. "I'm going to miss the old kook." O

MINDBAND

Pamela Sargent

Pamela Sargent won the Locus and Nebula Awards for her novella "Danny Goes to Mars" (*Asimov's*, October 1992). She has also been a finalist for the Hugo, Sidewise, and Theodore Sturgeon Awards. Her recent short story collection, *Thumbprints* (Golden Gryphon, 2004), is still available from the publisher in a unique boxed special edition with Pam's own thumbprint. Her novel *Farseed* (Tor, 2007), a sequel to *Earthseed* (reissued by Tor in 2007), was named a Best Book for the Teen Age by the New York Public Library in 2008; Tor will publish a third volume, *Seed Seeker*, in 2010. The author's last story for us, "After I Stopped Screaming," appeared in our October/November 2006 issue. She returns to our pages with a complex tale that investigates the dark border where paranoia meets reality.

Chris stood on the porch of the Westview Bed and Breakfast. Across the street, in front of a white Victorian house, a sign on a patch of lawn read "MindData Associates." An unusually large satellite dish hung from one of the house's gables. The location of the enterprise was as understated as its website, which had revealed nothing more than its name, its Westview address, a phone number, a fax number, an e-mail address, and two vague paragraphs about communications technology and unspecified future projects. The only name featured on the site was that of a Matthew Bigelow Elmendorf, who bore the titles of President and Founder. She had phoned a few times and left voice mails and a couple of messages with a man who identified himself only as "Bob." No one had ever returned her calls.

It had taken her several weeks to confirm what she had already suspected, that somewhere in the Pentagon's budget there was a line for MindData Associates, an exceedingly modest expenditure by Defense Department standards but a sizable chunk of change for any small or even medium-sized business. Finding out that much had been almost accidental, and the data entry clerk who had passed on that nugget of information had left the Defense Finance and Accounting Service only a week later to retire to Florida. The clerk had mentioned her hopes of early retirement in passing, but Chris had verified the story anyway, calling the clerk at her cellphone number to learn that she was moving to Sarasota.

What she had also found out from the clerk, under the guise of doing a human interest story about local Federal employees, was that it was nearly impossible to track down Defense Department expenditures for some of the programs it funded, thanks to obsolete computers, incompatible systems, turf battles between different groups, and either indifference or discouragement from the top. It was impossible to

audit most of the expenditures, and had been for some time. There was no way for her to find out from anybody she had talked to in the DFAS whether MindData Associates was a politician's pet project, a sophisticated high priority research effort, a top secret operation, or a possibly fraudulent enterprise that had stolen millions of taxpayer dollars. The tracks of MindData Associates were already thoroughly obscured by a dysfunctional bureaucracy.

A month after she had abandoned the story, Jack Belzer, the station manager, had let it be known to the news department that he wanted Chris to take some time off; all her efforts to conceal her ever more obvious jumpiness and disorientation apparently hadn't fooled him. By then the flashbacks were at the point where they would come upon her without warning, making her fear that one might hit while she was in the middle of a broadcast. The more she recalled of the night the Dunn Bridge had collapsed, the more convinced she was that MindData Associates was somehow connected to the incident.

She was on the bridge again, trapped in the crowd. "Some doofus screwed this project up big time," several voices called out near her. "Hope somebody can turn off that transponder." The surface under her feet suddenly buckled and gave way. She stumbled backward and found herself sitting in one of the large wicker chairs on the porch.

"Are you all right?"

The gray-haired man with the uncertain smile, another guest at the inn, had come outside. "Are you all right?" he repeated.

"I'm fine," she managed to say. "Really."

He sat down in the chair next to hers. "You sure?" She nodded. "Because you looked awfully unsteady there."

"I'm okay."

"If you don't mind my saying so, maybe you didn't have enough to eat for breakfast," he said. "Couldn't help noticing that you hardly ate anything."

"I usually don't have much for breakfast." She tried to smile. "Have to keep my weight down for my job."

"Your job?"

"I'm a TV news anchor at a station out in Indiana."

"Sounds interesting."

"It's not as glamorous as some people think." She glanced at him warily; he gazed back at her and offered her a half-smile. A retired guy, he had mentioned briefly in the dining room during breakfast while introducing himself, just passing through Westview; she didn't have to worry about what she might inadvertently reveal to him.

"I used to work for a station here, though," she continued, "over in Hannaford."

"I never watched the news much," the man said. "Not that I'm criticizing your profession or anything." He shook his head. "I just never had the time, what with running my own business."

"Then maybe you don't know what happened in Hannaford four years ago." She hesitated. She had been able to put that out of her mind after leaving this region, and then during the past year bits and pieces had started to come back to her—the crowds surging through the parking lot, the soldiers standing on the bridge.

"A crowd of people in Hannaford rioted one night, took over a mall, and then stormed a bridge," she continued. "The city had to call out the National Guard, and then the bridge, with all of those people still on it, collapsed."

"I remember now," he said. "That was a big story."

"I covered it," she said. She was about to say that she had been on the bridge, that she was one of the survivors who had been pulled out of the river, but thought better of revealing that much. "They found out afterward that the bridge had some structural problems, but it should have stayed up for years, it was all those people stamp-

ing their feet in unison that made the bridge collapse. Resonance vibrations or whatever—that's what caused it."

"I know," he said. "I studied engineering in college. All those people, just going nuts for no reason. They never did find out why, did they?"

"No, and none of the survivors could recall much afterward. Mass hysteria, that was the conclusion, which of course explains almost nothing." Over a thousand people had died, including those who had been fished out of the river below the bridge only to die later, and the fewer than four hundred other survivors, according to the follow-up stories she had seen, apparently had memories as blank as her own. She wondered if other survivors were beginning to have flashbacks like hers, how many might still be in the area. Many of them had moved out of the region even before she had, ahead of the flood of anticipated lawsuits and criminal charges that had never been brought, perhaps because several police officers, National Guard members, and extremely well-connected citizens had also been among the survivors and the dead.

"It's coming back to me now," the man said; she started. "That was a really big story," he added. "Even somebody like me couldn't escape it, it was all over the newspapers and TV, and now it's like everybody's just forgotten about it."

The front door of the MindData Associates building opened; two men in rumpled tweed jackets came outside and hurried down the steps to the sidewalk. She gazed up at the dish, noticing now that it wasn't open to the sky or angled to receive satellite signals, but instead seemed aimed at the bed and breakfast and the buildings near it.

Chris stood up. "If you'll excuse me." She cleared her throat. "Better get my walk in now, feels like it's going to be a warm day." She left the porch and moved toward the street, following the men.

"That's where it happened," Darlene said, pointing at the pylons that jutted out from the river. "That's where all those people brought down that old bridge. Just totally collapsed from all their stomping around."

Ceci leaned against the railing and peered down at the bluish-brown water below the walkway of the newly completed Dunn Bridge, which had been opened to traffic just three months earlier; the pylons were all that remained of the old bridge. The Mall Riot and Bridge Collapse—Ceci's mental headline for the story Darlene was telling her—had been the first story told to her by her coworkers during her first day on the job. Before she had moved to Westview and found work in the nearby city of Hannaford, that story had been only vaguely recalled yet chilling televised images of a river of people streaming onto a bridge, followed by shots of the crowd stamping their feet and singing until the bridge gave way, rippling and then becoming a deep curve as the structure slowly fell apart. The people trapped on the bridge had looked like thrown-away dolls as they dropped into the river; Ceci had found out later that over a thousand people had died and fewer than four hundred had survived. At least that was what she remembered hearing when the story of the Hannaford riot had merited national and even international news coverage, before that story was displaced by other more recent and newsworthy tales of disaster on a large scale. The outside world had moved on, but people in Hannaford still clung to their brief moment of notoriety.

"My sister Kendra was on the bridge that night," Darlene continued. Ceci was aware of that, too, because Darlene made sure that anybody new to the office quickly found out about her personal connection to Hannaford's biggest story ever. "And she's never been the same since."

Ceci said, "Hmm," in what she hoped was a sympathetic tone. The only reason she had agreed to take this stroll with her officemate during their afternoon break was that she knew some in the office thought her a bit snooty, a little too standoffish. "Sooner or later, Darlene'll want you to take the walk," Ceci's coworkers had told her during

her first week. "She'll take you through the parking lot and down to the bridge and tell you all about how her sister was in the middle of the riot and could have been interviewed on *Good Morning America* and *60 Minutes* and maybe even by Oprah but by then she just couldn't get it together and she hasn't been the same ever since." The Hannaford riot was the most important event in Darlene's life, even if only by proxy.

"She's never been the same," Darlene repeated. "She's, like, how can I put it? Haunted. She's, like, totally haunted and screwed up."

"Does your sister still live around here?" Ceci asked.

"Oh, no, she moved away a few months afterward. She couldn't have stayed around here, what with all those reminders. Almost none of them stayed around here, they say, the survivors, the ones who weren't completely disabled, I mean, like, you can understand why they didn't." Darlene waved a hand at the pylons. "You know, Kendra never could remember anything much about what happened except this feeling that all these other voices, all these other thoughts, were kind of like rushing inside her and through her, that she wasn't, like, really herself or just herself, but was turning into part of something else and being pushed around by something else, and after that it was like her brain had burned out."

Ceci nodded, tuning the other woman out. Already she wanted to head back to her work station and close out everything around her. That was one of the side benefits of her monotonous job, she supposed, that its repetitiveness and simple routines could, for a time, numb her to the world around her and allow her to tune it out.

Ceci was still trying to remember where she had left her cellphone as she drove home to Westview. Her last call had been from her sister Reine, who had told her that their mother seemed to be feeling a bit better, had eaten most of the lunch Reine had brought home for her, and had even pulled herself together long enough to stack some dishes in the dishwasher.

Then she knew where her cellphone had to be. Steve, her supervisor, had suddenly appeared at her work station; Ceci had cut Reine off and then dropped the phone into the open top drawer of her desk. Steve didn't approve of any personal calls at work, even if people kept them short, even if you made up the lost time by shaving a few minutes off a break or a lunch hour and used a cell so as not to tie up the office lines. It was Steve's fault that she had tossed the phone into the drawer instead of stuffing it into her purse, as she usually did, but she could blame her sister, too, for calling with the momentous news that their mother had felt well enough to eat lunch and stack the dirty dishes.

Her desk was locked; no one could grab her phone. But she felt completely disconnected, abruptly cut off from the world instead of tuning it out by choice.

Resentment welled within her. That tightening of her stomach and flaming of her face was becoming too familiar.

The music came to her just as she drove past the bed and breakfast. She did not recognize the tune at first, then knew it for an old Beatles song, "Eleanor Rigby." The sound was so sharp and clear that she might have been listening through her iPod. She could almost believe that the music was right inside her head, centered right behind her eyes.

The music suddenly broke off.

A gray-haired man standing on the porch of the bed and breakfast was staring in her direction. She looked back at the street as her car turned the corner.

The street was empty of traffic, except for a gray hatchback making a left turn. Marc thrust his hands inside his pockets. "Eleanor Rigby," he thought. That had been one of Nora's favorite songs. That had to be why he had imagined hearing it just now,

why the tune had suddenly been inside his head, sounding a lot clearer than the song ever had on Nora's old LP.

He had intended to drive into Hannaford to dine in a restaurant highly recommended by his pocket travel guidebook, but he had lost his appetite. He had never been prone to delusions, but he was hearing things now.

Nora had done this to him. It had been a mistake, thinking that he could put their breakup behind him by taking a road trip around the country, by getting as far away as possible from anything that might remind him of her.

It was all coming back to him again. I dread coming home, she had told him, never knowing what I'm going to find, never knowing if you're going to harangue me or else be sitting around depressed. He had retired early, congratulating himself that he could easily afford to do it, that he'd sold the business at just the right moment and could spend more time with Nora, and that had been just about the time that she had decided she didn't really want to leave her job after all, that she even sometimes enjoyed the pressure and the hassles and the extra hours and feeling that the people she was training and advising and getting placed in new jobs really needed her.

I can't be everything to you, she had said. What she meant was that she didn't want to be anything to him now. Maybe she was paying him back for all the times he had been away on business, late coming home, or had cancelled their plans for the evening or weekend at the last minute. It had taken retirement for him to realize that he had put so much of himself into his business that there had been nothing left over for the rest of his life, no hobbies, few friends, little knowledge of anything else except the business. At least there were no children to be caught up in his divorce; much as he had hoped for them once, he could be grateful for that now.

He went down the steps to the sidewalk and headed toward the town's only eatery, a place just down the street, "Dan's Cozy Corner," a small shack with the wide windows and small sliding doors of an ice cream shop on one side of the front entrance. He could use a cup of coffee; he could use any distraction that would keep him from having to go back to the bed and breakfast and sit in his room or in the downstairs common area brooding about Nora and the years of shared life that had somehow slipped away from both of them.

The gray-haired man walked past the other five tables and sat down at the one in the back corner. Reine had not seen him in here before, but had noticed him walking along the sidewalk in front of the bed and breakfast that morning. She guessed that he was yet another consultant brought in by MindData Associates, even though he didn't look it in his trench coat and well-tailored slacks. Most of the younger consultants looked scruffier, with the pale faces and vacant stares of people who spent most of their time indoors staring at computer monitors, while the older ones were usually hard-looking and slightly overweight men. Summers brought tourists who wanted to be near the hiking trails or spend a few days at the lake, while winters brought the cross-country skiers, but the other two seasons belonged mostly to MindData Associates here in Westview, and a good thing, too. Without their employees and consultants, Dan Howell had often told her, and their continuing appetite for hearty breakfasts, hamburgers, hot dogs, fries, sandwiches, orders to go, and ice cream, his place might have gone out of business ages ago.

Reine came out from behind the counter. "What'll it be?" she asked as she approached the man, flashing him her automatic smile.

He looked up from the menu. There was a lost look in his eyes, a sadness that made her think of that song that had popped into her head a short while ago. All the lonely people, she thought; she knew "Eleanor Rigby" because her mother used to

sing it to herself back in the days when she had not been so lonely, before she and her daughters had ended up in Westview.

"A Danburger with cheese," he replied, "and a cup of coffee, black." He frowned. "Menu says you close at six."

"That's all right," Reine said. "Dan'll stay here long enough to cook your burger, and I'll give you plenty of time to eat it before closing up. And if you want dessert, we can stay open until you eat your ice cream, unless you'd rather take a cone with you." Ceci would be home soon; Reine would let her handle their mother by herself that evening.

The stranger wrinkled his brows and offered her an uncertain look.

"This used to be a Dairy Queen," she continued, "but Dan bought back the ice cream machines after he gave up the franchise, so we can give you a tasty dessert."

"I'll see how I feel after I have the burger."

She went back to the counter and called out the order to Dan in the kitchen, brought the man his cup of coffee, then returned to the counter to go over the day's receipts. It struck her then that she had been working here for less than a year, and yet it was often an effort to recall any part of her earlier life ever since she had settled so readily into this one.

Even worse, she had dragged her sister into the life she had now.

The gray-haired man was still staring into space. She had expected him to take out a paperback or a newspaper to read, or to start distracting himself with a cellphone, as the solitary customers who came into the Cozy Corner usually did.

"One Danburger coming up." Dan Howell pushed through the swinging door of the kitchen and set the burger, open-faced on a toasted bun with melted shredded cheddar cheese, sliced red onion, lettuce, and tomato, in front of her. "When I'm finished in the kitchen, mind locking up?"

"Of course not." She was closing the place for him three or four nights a week now. Dan had grown to trust her, and she didn't mind the extra responsibility, which kept her away from the house and Ceci's resentful silences and their mother's ever-present grief for a few more moments.

Dan disappeared into the kitchen. Reine brought her lone customer his food. "There you go," she said.

"Thanks." He put the burger together, ignoring the ketchup bottle on the table, and bit into it. "Pretty good," he mumbled.

"Best burger in town," Reine said. "It's also the only burger in town unless McDonald's or Burger King decides to move in."

An unhappy look crossed the man's face. Stranger that he was, she found herself feeling sorry for him; he looked as lonely and lost as her mother usually did. "I wouldn't think there'd be that many customers for you, even without the competition."

"Oh, you'd be surprised. I haven't been here that long, but Dan told me that when this was still a Dairy Queen, he was barely scraping by. The only thing keeping him going was that his wife had a job in Hannaford and his son helped out whenever he was home from college. Then this new company moved in down the street and the bed and breakfast opened, and suddenly business really picked up. After that, when the interstate put in that exit two miles up the road, he decided to chuck the franchise and turn this place into the Cozy Corner. I started working for him after I moved here last year."

She was running on, but felt that he wanted to listen to her, that he welcomed the conversation. "Want me to freshen your coffee?" she asked.

"Any rule against my buying you a cup?"

"If I have coffee now," she said, "I won't be able to sleep, and I have to be here early tomorrow for the breakfast crowd. And right now, I'd better finish tallying up the receipts."

She returned to the counter, a bit surprised at the lack of alarm she felt. The man

was a stranger, and she had no reason to trust him just because he looked respectable and well-dressed, but somehow she sensed that she had nothing to fear from him.

He said, "You don't have to be afraid of me, you know," and then his eyes widened, as if he had surprised himself by saying that to her.

She said, "I know."

Catherine sat in her darkened living room, unable to will herself even to move. She should force herself to go to the kitchen and take the clean dishes out of the dishwasher. Ceci would be home soon; it would help if her daughter saw her doing something, even if it was just putting the dishes away.

"Eleanor Rigby," she thought, wondering why she had heard that particular melody so clearly before. She used to sing that song when Jon was still alive, back when she was not one of all those lonely people, when she had still had her husband and her home and two reasonably contented daughters and more than enough reasons to get up in the morning and do the work of a day. She had not thought about that song since losing Jon. To have to hear it again inside herself seemed an unbearable cruelty.

The back door creaked open, then closed. "Mom?"

"Cecilia?" she replied.

"Where are you?" her daughter asked.

"In here," Catherine managed to say; even saying that much was an effort. There were more sounds out in the kitchen, and then the stomping of feet.

Ceci appeared in front of her. She had her father's reddish-brown hair. She folded her arms and thrust out her chin, the way Jon used to do. "Have you been sitting in here all day?"

Now the demands would begin. You've got to pull yourself together, you can't go on like this, I can't stand seeing you like this.

"I know I can't go on like this," Catherine said. "Got to pull myself together."

Ceci sat down across from her. "I'm glad to hear you admit it."

Catherine had not meant to say that. The words did not seem to belong to her. "It isn't fair," she continued, "having you and your sister stuck in this town worrying about me." Those words didn't seem to belong to her, either. "You should get out of here, both of you, just pack up and leave while you can still have your own lives."

"We can't do that until we're sure you'll be all right."

Catherine began to hum, then realized what tune she was humming. Ceci jumped to her feet.

"Mom," Ceci said, "why are you humming that particular song?"

She was about to say why the melody had been on her mind, but held back. The admission would only be yet another reason for her daughter to think she was beyond hope. Hearing old songs—pretty soon, she would be making a confession about the voices, the ones she sometimes heard whispering to her that Jon was waiting for her, that all she had to do to be reunited with him was to take some pills and tie a plastic bag around her head and lie down and never get up again.

"I don't know," Catherine replied.

"Mom—" Ceci began.

Catherine suddenly saw herself through her daughter's eyes, a middle-aged woman with uncombed hair cascading over her shoulders, sitting there in the dark in her flip-flops and bathrobe, a mound of ashes and cigarette butts in the ashtray next to her because she couldn't be bothered even to empty the ashtray. Ceci had to come home every day wondering if she would find her mother dead from an overdose, maniacally cleaning the house, still in bed, or the house engulfed in flames because she had been careless with a cigarette.

"Think I'd better put away the dishes." Catherine slowly stood up. Her daughter

looked up at her with eyes widened by surprise. "Then I'm going to get dressed. Then maybe we can decide what to do about supper before Reine gets home."

Marc climbed the short staircase to the long front porch of the bed and breakfast. He had stayed at the Cozy Corner for almost an hour, even allowing the waitress to talk him into having a chocolate dip ice cream cone. It had been surprisingly comforting to sit with her, and she had apparently wanted to talk.

Her name was Reine Alcott and she lived with her mother and her sister Ceci in Westview in a house that had once belonged to her grandmother. Her mother had moved there from a Philadelphia suburb after Reine's father had been killed by a stray bullet on a city street during a drive-by shooting. It had taken three weeks for the police to find the killer, a seventeen-year-old kid who had been aiming at somebody in a rival gang, and almost a year more for the beginning of a trial that had ended with the kid sentenced to a twenty-year stretch.

Reine's mother had moved as soon as the trial was over. By then she had been in bad enough psychological shape that Reine had not wanted her to live in Westview alone, so she had left art school to look after her and been fortunate enough to find work at the Cozy Corner a week after arriving here. Ceci, who had graduated from college last May, had moved in with them afterward and now worked in the financial office of a hospital in Hannaford. Reine worried about her mother, but at least she and Ceci had enough resources to look after her. Her job had its demands, but Dan was an easygoing boss and often allowed her to take time off to work on the paintings she still planned to exhibit someday. She spoke of the problems in her life with an easy manner and a lack of self-pity that had impressed him.

It occurred to him that he had not had such a long, almost intimate, discussion with another person in years. He had even told Reine Alcott a little about himself, that he had been in the business of installing central heating and air conditioning systems before selling his company and was getting a divorce after almost thirty years of marriage. "We grew apart," he had explained, "so it's probably for the best," but Reine had tilted her head and gazed at him sympathetically.

He opened the front door and stepped inside. The strikingly pretty blond TV reporter he had met that morning sat on the sofa at the far end of the room, leafing through a magazine. The only other guest, a young man with short brown hair and wire-rimmed glasses, sat in an armchair in one corner, pecking away at a laptop. Marc had also seen him for the first time at breakfast, when he had appeared in the dining room just long enough to fill his travel mug with coffee and grab a muffin before heading out the door. Near the staircase, Brad Malinowsky, who owned and ran the inn with his wife Liane, stood behind the desk where guests checked in, writing in a ledger.

Brad looked up. "Good evening, Mr. Zechman."

"I've been here for two days now," Marc said, appreciating the younger man's courtesy. "Think you could start calling me Marc."

The young man in the corner suddenly snapped his laptop shut, slipped it under his arm, and headed for the staircase. The blond woman lifted her head and gazed after him. Her lips were pressed into a thin line; she looked angry.

Liane Malinowsky came into the room, carrying a cup and a plate with a sandwich. She was a slightly overweight woman with long black hair pinned up on her head. "There you go, Ms. Szekely," she said as she handed the cup and plate to the blond woman. "Think you'll like the tea."

"Thanks, and please call me Chris." The blond woman set the plate on the coffee table in front of her, then sipped from the cup. "How much do I owe you?"

"Not a cent. Our fault for not letting you know the Cozy Corner closes at six."

Marc slipped out of his coat, draped it over a chair, then sat down in an armchair

facing the sofa, close enough for the blond woman to talk to him if she felt like it but not so close that she would think he was flirting. His impending divorce had revealed to him that he no longer knew how to behave around women who were not either business colleagues or the wives of men he knew.

"This is good tea," the blond woman said.

"If you're still here this coming weekend, you can have more at our Sunday brunch and afternoon tea," Liane said. "All the food, except for the imported tea biscuits, is homemade or from local farms. Just make sure you get down by nine, because we fill up pretty fast. Get folks coming in after church and then more people in the afternoon for the tea, and Dan's Cozy Corner's closed on Sundays."

"I was wondering—" the blond woman began before falling silent.

Liane tilted her head. "Yes?"

"That business across the street, MindData Associates. What exactly do they do?"

Liane smiled. "Your guess is as good as mine."

The blond woman uncrossed her long jeans-clad legs. "You mean you don't know?"

"It's got something to do with communications technology. That's all anybody ever said whenever I asked. They've been there for almost four years now, moved in when Brad and I opened this place, and frankly they're the difference between barely breaking even and making a profit. We almost always have one or two folks staying here who are connected with them, and sometimes a group, but we don't see much of them. They get up and they head over there for the day and we usually don't see them again until they come back and go to sleep."

"You never got curious?"

Liane had seemed about ready to sit down on the sofa; now she backed away. "They pretty much keep to themselves. Once in a while, the owner drops in for the brunch or the tea with a couple of people. Anyway, we kind of have the feeling that whatever they're doing, that's their business. They've got some kind of government connection, and the only reason I know that is that some of our guests arrive here with government ID or credit cards. And as long as they keep giving us their business, that's about all I care to know."

"Can't say I blame you for that," Marc said, offering Liane a smile.

The innkeeper smiled back at him, looking a little more relaxed.

"I suppose . . ." the blond woman began. She had seemed about to ask something else.

"Better get back to cleaning up the kitchen." Liane hurried from the room, followed by her husband.

Chris Szekely picked up the plate and nibbled at the sandwich, turning away from Marc as if to signal that she was uninterested in more conversation. He got up and walked toward the stairs.

Reine was dancing, spinning around on tiptoes. The chandeliers above her flickered out and were replaced by a network of tree limbs. Ceci and their mother were dancing, too, arms outstretched as they twirled. Dan was to her right, standing under a tree, talking to the man who had come into the Cozy Corner that evening; a blond woman stood near them. She heard the sound of flutes and piccolos in the distance. She danced toward the trees, still spinning, as joy welled up inside her.

"Are you picking this up?" Dan asked her.

"Yes," she replied, "and it's wonderful, I feel so happy."

"Then I think we'd better shut it down now." That was Ceci, who was suddenly standing next to her. The music stopped.

Reine was awake. She lay there, holding on to the fading vision, which felt more like the memory of an actual incident. Her dreams didn't usually feel so real, so much like part of her life that she had to lie in bed for a while before she realized that she had

been dreaming instead of remembering the past. She curled up around her happiness and closed her eyes, refusing to look at the digital clock on her night table, not wanting to know exactly how much time she had left to sleep before she had to get up again.

Catherine danced, twirling around on her toes, and looked up to see a canopy of tree branches. Reine and Ceci were also dancing, arms outstretched as they turned. Jon was there, standing under one of the trees with Dan, the man who had hired Reine to work in his café, and a blond woman she did not know. She heard the sound of wind instruments and danced in the direction of the trees, content to dance forever.

"Jon," she said, reaching out to him. He smiled at her as she clasped his hands.

"Are you picking this up?" Dan asked her.

"Yes," she answered.

"Then we'd better shut it down now." That was Ceci, who was suddenly standing next to her. She could no longer hear any music.

She woke up. Jon had been there, under the trees; he was still alive. She clung to that certainty until she was alert enough to remember the truth, and longed to lose herself in her dream again. The man in the dream had been someone else, not Jon, someone taller with much grayer hair.

No, he was alive, she told herself, with her again in some way that she did not understand. She did not have to mourn him now.

Marc got up feeling alert. He had awakened only once during the night, in the middle of a dream that he could now recall only in pieces. He had been in a wooded area, and the waitress from the place he had eaten at was there, along with the owner of the place and the blond anchorwoman, Chris Szekely. Someone else had been there, too, a woman he did not know. That was all that he could remember of his dream now, but thinking about it cheered him. He wondered why.

He went to the window and gazed across the street at the large white house with the big satellite dish. Lately he had been waking several times during the night, imagining that he was home again before reorienting himself; last night had been an exception. Maybe he still needed to catch up on his sleep. He had thought of checking out and leaving Westview that morning, but staying on for another day or two, maybe even into next week, might make him feel more rested.

Reine approached the table, ready to take the order, when she heard Ted say, "... some home repairs, and maybe on Sunday I can get in nine holes at Hannaford Muni."

"Then you'll be getting more done this weekend than I will," Bob said as Reine stood there with her pad and pencil. "Just hope I can catch up on sleep."

Ted said, "And I still think moving the group away from here's a bad idea."

"Matt thinks it might be time to find a new site," Bob replied, "and once he makes up his mind, it's not easy to talk him out of it." That was how she knew them, as Ted and Bob, no last names, even though they were regular customers. Ted was going bald, while Bob had thick wiry dark brown hair, but they both wore tweed jackets and had the same stocky build. They always paid in cash, as did the other employees of MindData Associates, although Dan accepted credit and debit cards. During all the times the two had eaten at the Cozy Corner, Reine had never heard either of them mention any wives or children, friends or family, hobbies or interests. All she knew about them was that they lived in a suburb of Hannaford about a twenty-minute drive away and that they worked at MindData Associates.

"You're telling me," Ted said, "but we don't need more space, and how much more isolated can we get?"

"You don't have to convince me. Talk to Matt. It's not even that he really wants to

move, he's just wondering if we might have to. Look, maybe it'll work out, depending on how this next phase goes."

Reine's fingers tightened around her pencil. Today had started off so well, what with her mother actually giving her and Ceci a hug before they left for work. If Mind-Data Associates was thinking of moving its offices out of Westview, Dan's Cozy Corner would really take a hit.

She forced herself to smile as the two men looked up. "What'll it be?" she asked.

"The usual," Ted said.

"Same for me," Bob added. "The usual."

"You got it." The usual was coffee, orange juice, scrambled eggs, and toast for Ted and coffee, grapefruit juice, a Western omelet, and home fries for Bob, unless it was lunchtime, when the usual became a turkey club and cole slaw with coffee for Ted and a Danburger with cheese, no onion, fries, and a Coke for Bob. She wrote down their order and turned as another customer entered the café, a tall slim blond woman, a stranger; she sat down at a table near the door.

Dan came out of the kitchen. "Usual breakfast for Ted and Bob," Reine said under her breath as she headed toward the woman.

"One of these days, maybe they'll surprise me." Dan glanced toward the new customer; his brows went up. "You look familiar, miss."

The blond woman lifted her head. Reine glanced from her to Dan.

"I know I've seen you before." Dan leaned against the counter. "Of course—you used to do the Action News, didn't you? Chris Szekely. On WKLY."

The woman sat up straight; her eyes widened. "That was a while ago," she said. An uneasy smile flickered across her face.

"Not that long ago. Hair's different, but your face looks the same, and I couldn't forget you, not after the stories you did about that mall riot and the Dunn Bridge collapse."

Ted stared at them. Bob had turned around in his seat.

"Well," the woman said after a long pause, "I guess I should be glad somebody remembers me."

"I'll bet a lot of folks still remember you around here," Dan said. "That whole business was just about the biggest deal ever in Hannaford."

Reine knew what he was talking about; Dan had related the whole story to her not long after hiring her, as she had only a vague recollection of news broadcasts and items about the incident. Even her mother, reclusive as she had become, was aware of the riot and bridge collapse that had given Hannaford, for a brief time, national notoriety. People around here seemed to take an odd pride in the story, as if its drama and significance had somehow lent them more importance than they would have had otherwise.

The woman leaned forward. Reine noticed that her hands were balled into fists. "Yes, it was a big story." Her voice was so low that Reine could barely make out her words. "I'll have a cup of coffee, please."

"Just coffee?" Dan asked.

The woman nodded.

"Cream and sugar?" Reine asked.

The woman shook her head. "Black."

Dan retreated to the kitchen. Reine grabbed three mugs from under the counter and went to the coffee machine. She poured one cup, brought it to the woman, then filled and carried the other two mugs to Bob and Ted.

Reine heard the door creak open. She turned and saw her mother close the door, move toward an empty table, and sit down.

For a moment, Reine was too shocked to stir. That was the first surprise, that her

mother had actually pulled herself together and left the house. The second was that she had combed her hair and pinned it up and looked reasonably well-groomed in her short red jacket and black slacks.

Reine went to her. "What can I get you?" she said almost automatically.

Her mother looked up, her lips curved in a gentle smile. "Oh, just a diet ginger ale." She shook her head. "Think I've had enough coffee already."

Reine leaned toward her. "Are you sure you're all right?" she whispered.

"I'm fine," her mother replied. "I'm all right, really, just felt like taking a walk." Her eyes narrowed; she stared past Reine and tilted her head, as if listening to something.

Reine straightened. The blond woman was staring at her mother. The woman set her cup down, stood up, and walked toward them.

Chris was picking up more whispers, words and thoughts that didn't seem to belong to her. She had heard them last night, after getting out of her car, even though there had been no one else in the small parking lot with her. The whispers had been more insistent that morning, as her vivid memory of a dream of dancing in a forest grove had faded. Nothing to worry about, she had told herself, nothing like the intermittent whispers that occasionally evoked memories of that night on the collapsing bridge.

"I won't ever forget him," Chris murmured as she headed toward the waitress and the older woman, "but it's past, and now, finally, I can think about him and remember him without wanting to die." Those words were not her own.

The waitress took her arm as Chris sat down. "You're shaking," the young woman said.

Chris saw that her hands were trembling. She managed to slip from the younger woman's grasp. "It's all right, dear," Chris heard herself say, "I'm feeling better, really I am. I've been mourning Jon much too long." He would have wanted her to go on, she realized, and now she was recalling the time he had said that to her, only a few months before his death. "Don't want you turning into my mother," he had told her, "sitting around in black, talking about my dad watching over us from above." They had laughed then, because the thought of either of them dying had seemed so distant.

"Don't want you turning into my mother," Chris continued, "sitting around dressed in black and talking about Dad watching over us from above."

"Are you all right?"

Chris forced herself to look up. The waitress was backing away. The older woman's eyes widened. "Are you all right?" the woman repeated.

She did not trust herself to speak. Someone else was whispering to her now. "... tell Matt about ..." But that voice was coming from outside of her. Chris leaned back, willing herself to be calm, and knew that she was inside herself again.

"It was very sudden, wasn't it," Chris murmured. "Your husband's death, I mean."

The two men who had been sitting in the back were talking to the waitress. "But what about your breakfasts?" the waitress asked as one of the men thrust several bills into her hand.

"It's okay," one of the men replied. "Guess we're not that hungry after all." They hurried outside.

The older woman was standing next to her now. "Maybe you need some air, too," she murmured to Chris. "Mind taking a walk with me?"

Reine stood in the doorway of the Cozy Corner. "It's all right," Catherine called out to her. "I'll be back in just a bit." She leaned toward the other woman. "She's my daughter," she explained.

"Yes," the blond woman whispered, "I know."

Catherine said, "So you picked that up, too." The woman began to cross the street; Catherine kept at her side. "A couple of weeks ago," she went on, "I would have just assumed I was imagining this, that I was going crazy. You were saying just what I was thinking before."

"Yes."

"It was almost like I was listening to myself. And you knew my husband was—that he—" She paused. "It's just a coincidence, has to be." Reine looked much like her; someone in town might have mentioned that Catherine was a widow.

The other woman gazed at the building occupied by MindData Associates. The two tweed-jacketed customers who had rushed out of the Cozy Corner stood in front of the white Victorian with the big satellite dish, looking in Catherine's direction.

"Excuse me," the balding of the two men called out, "but I was just going to say—"

The blond woman narrowed her eyes. "We remember you, too," the other man interrupted. "From the news, I mean, when you were doing those follow-up stories about the bridge collapse. We lost one of our own people there, a young researcher."

"I know." A mixture of emotions flickered across the blond woman's face; Catherine saw fear in her eyes and then the glint of anger.

"Huge story," the balding man said.

"Yes," the blond woman said in a low voice. "It was just the kind of story that might have been my big break. Unfortunately just the opposite happened. WKLY started worrying that I might be suffering from something like post-traumatic stress disorder, that maybe I'd break down during a broadcast. The business manager was probably wondering how much their insurer was going to have to shell out to my therapist, not that therapy ever did me much good. And of course there was the possibility of a lawsuit or charges of some sort sooner or later, and my contract was running out anyway. So I got canned."

"Sorry to hear it," the balding man said.

"Oh, I found other work eventually, after I left the area."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that."

The blond woman's lips were pressed together; Catherine could see the rage inside her.

"Better get going," the younger man said to his companion. The two bounded up the front steps to the porch of the Victorian and disappeared through the front door.

"Are you all right?" Catherine asked. The other woman, still gazing after the men, did not reply. "Guess I should introduce myself—I'm Catherine Alcott."

The blond woman turned toward her. "Chris Szekely." Now she seemed distracted. "It's a coincidence, what I said. I'm okay now. Ever since the bridge—" She looked down.

"It's all right," Catherine said. "I understand. This is the first time I've left my house in—" She had to recall how long it had been and was suddenly dismayed at herself. "Months, except for maybe wandering into the yard once in a while or taking a walk around the block. If it weren't for my daughters, I don't know what would have happened to me." She reached inside her purse, fumbled for her cigarettes, and slipped one from the almost empty pack.

Chris Szekely lifted her head; she looked calmer. Then she glanced toward the large white house. "I don't suppose you can tell me anything about what they do. MindData Associates, I mean."

Catherine lit her cigarette. "I'm afraid not," she replied, "but you could ask Reine. My daughter, I mean, the waitress. But she never said much to me about them except that they're regular customers."

Chris Szekely offered her a wan smile. "Then there's probably no point in asking her." She paused. "Sorry about my little lapse." Before Catherine could say anything more to her, the blond woman turned away and walked toward the bed and breakfast.

Reine had talked Catherine into having lunch at the Cozy Corner. There had been only one other customer, a trucker who had pulled off the highway, so they ate their turkey sandwiches together after the trucker had paid his bill and left. They said little about the blond newswoman, with Reine briefly commenting on how creepy she had sounded and Catherine mentioning only that the woman was obviously still deeply affected by her past experiences.

"I was wondering," Catherine said, and then paused.

"What is it?" Reine asked.

"That TV reporter—she asked me if I knew anything about MindData Associates."

"So what did you tell her?"

"I didn't tell her anything. I don't know anything. I did say that maybe she should ask you."

Reine finished the last piece of her sandwich. "I don't know much about them, either."

"They come in here all the time, you've said so. I thought you might have picked up some information."

"You're awfully curious about them all of a sudden." Reine reached across the table and grabbed her hand. "Not that I mind. I'm glad to see you up and about and interested in things." She sighed. "Actually, I know almost nothing about them except that they're some kind of communications company."

"Doesn't that strike you as odd? I mean, you've been working here for a while now?"

Reine glanced toward the kitchen, where the proprietor had gone to prepare his own lunch. "Dan doesn't know anything, either," she said softly. "When I first started here, I asked him about MindData Associates and he said he didn't have a clue and that it didn't matter, what mattered was that they helped keep this place going. It's pretty much what everyone in town seems to think . . . they don't know, they don't care, and it isn't any of their business anyway. And I never got the feeling—" She paused, then continued in a whisper, "A couple of times, I'd ask one of them about what they did, just a casual question, but I never got a real answer, just a blank stare or some mumbo-jumbo about systems management or research and consulting on satellite technology or communications in general. I wasn't about to push it." She shrugged. "After all, they are good customers, their boss seems like a nice old guy, and their offices don't look any different from what you'd expect."

"You've been inside their building?"

"Sure. Sometimes they'll order lunch, or sandwiches if a few of them are working late, and ask us to deliver the food. Bob's got his desk in the front room, with a computer and a couple of file cabinets and what looks like a supply closet. Haven't seen the other floors, but I wouldn't imagine they're anything unusual."

Catherine sipped coffee. An unfamiliar sensation stirred inside her, cheering her and yet making her apprehensive at the same time. Curiosity, she realized. It had been a while since she had been curious about anything.

Someone was following her. Chris turned as a car passed her, but saw no other vehicles on the road. She had been walking ever since leaving Dan's Cozy Corner, trying to clear her mind. She had passed the bed and breakfast and then kept on going until she was well outside the town, surrounded by the open fields sprouting with new grass that separated Westview from the nearest Wal-Mart.

She was alone. There were no voices whispering inside her now, but someone had been following her. She was certain of it; she had sensed it.

She stopped and took a breath. No one was following her now; no one else was on the highway. Time to turn back, she thought. Judging by what she recalled about her drive

to Westview, she would encounter more traffic before too long, vehicles heading toward the Wal-Mart, and there was no sidewalk or even much of a shoulder along the road.

A car appeared at the top of the small hill up ahead. She recognized the blue Toyota that had passed her before. She halted and watched the car as it approached, then saw that the driver was one of the two men who had bolted so abruptly from the Cozy Corner.

The car slowed as it neared her, then stopped. The balding man behind the wheel beckoned to her. She hesitated, then crossed the road and stood next to the driver's side of the car.

The window rolled down. "Need a ride back?" the man asked.

Chris was silent.

"Name's Ted. Thought you might like a ride."

Chris said, "You were following me."

"Not at all. This is the route I always take when I head home."

Maybe it was, she thought. Maybe he was leaving work early today.

"Hey, believe me, I'm not some weird guy, just happened to be going this way. Any-way, I don't mind giving you a lift back." Ted looked up. "Looks like it might rain."

She doubted that; the few grayish clouds overhead didn't look like rain clouds to her. But maybe this was her chance to find out more about MindData Associates. "That's very kind of you," she said. "I'm staying at the Westview Bed and Breakfast."

"Figured as much."

"Thanks." She walked around the front of the car and got in on the other side, sensing that she was safe, at least during the short ride back to town.

"What brought you to Westview, anyway?" he asked as she fastened her seat belt.

He already knew who she was, and that she had survived the madness of the bridge collapse; he would never believe that she had come here simply to relax. "I'm visiting a couple of old friends in Hannaford," she said.

The car moved forward. "There isn't any chance you might come back to one of the local stations, is there?"

"No. I'm doing all right where I am. Maybe someday I'll get another big story." She heard the bitter tone in her voice. "And what do you do?"

"Work for MindData Associates."

"I guessed that much. What kind of work?"

"Systems manager."

That told her little, but also made it impossible for her to ask more questions without seeming intrusive. "I wouldn't have thought you'd have that much of a system to manage," she said. "That building of yours doesn't look like it could house that many employees."

He glanced at her, then looked back at the road. "Even a small computer network has its quirks."

The car climbed another slope and passed the abandoned brick schoolhouse that marked the edge of Westview. "This town's been a good place for us," Ted went on, "quiet, nice folks, no distractions."

"Didn't you used to have offices in Hannaford?" she asked.

"Yes, we did." He glanced at her again. "I'm surprised you remember that."

"Local businesses were one of the things I kept up with at WKLY."

"Matt was thinking of moving out of Hannaford even before our lease ran out, and then the building here came on the market, so we moved and it's worked out pretty well for us."

"So your company owns the building?" she said. "You aren't just renting space?"

"Matt figured that owning it made more sense for us."

"Guess that means you plan to stay for a while."

"I hope so. I mean, we've got nice offices and a quiet environment and at this point, we're kind of important to the economy of this town. I'd hate to do anything that might set the people here back."

Strange, she thought, that he would be that concerned about the welfare of Westview's residents.

He pulled up in front of the inn. "Thanks for the ride," she said.

"No problem."

She got out of the car and walked toward the porch, hurried up the steps, then turned around. Ted drove down the street in the direction he had come; his car disappeared around a corner. She went inside and stood by one of the windows that looked out over the street.

"Feeling better today?" someone said behind her.

Chris turned to see Marc Zechman. "Yes," she replied.

"Glad to hear it." The man wore a trench coat, obviously on his way out. He nodded at her again, then opened the door and stepped outside.

She continued to wait by the window. As she was about to give up, she saw Ted's blue Toyota coming back along the street. She watched it pull into the small parking lot next to the offices of MindData Associates.

He had been following her.

Chris lay in her room, unable to sleep. She could follow Ted home, where he might be more willing to answer a few questions. She could nose around some more in the tiny town library, where she had perused various town records and called up past local news stories on one of the four public computers and learned only that the Victorian housing MindData Associates was owned by Matthew Bigelow Elmendorf and that he also lived in the building in an apartment on the top floor. He had left few tracks on the Internet; he had attended CalTech in the late 1950s but had no degree. He had given a less than revealing interview to a local weekly after moving to Westview, saying only that he and his associates worked in communications and consulted with various firms in other parts of the country. The photo published with that story was of an affable, rumpled-looking man with thick white hair and crinkles around his eyes. The interview had yielded quotes from Elmendorf about the un-tapped energy of human minds, the possibility of transmitting thoughts through what he called a "mental broadband," and a hope that humankind might be able to transcend violence if people could communicate their deepest longings and hopes to one another. The interview made him sound like either a harmless crank or a charlatan. She had found no other news items about him or his company.

"Kind of a hermit," the librarian had told her; Chris had not noticed that he was looking over her shoulder.

"Excuse me?" she had said.

"He's kind of a recluse." The librarian was a young round-faced man with broad shoulders who looked more like a football coach than a librarian. "Matthew Elmendorf, I mean. You almost never see him around town, and the only way you even know if he's home is when the lights are on in his building at night."

She got out of bed, pulled on her bathrobe, and left the room. The hallway's dim light was enough for her to find her way down the stairs. There was no one in the common area. She went into the front room and leaned against the window.

Across the street, light shone from the windows on the second and third floor of the Victorian. Three in the morning, she thought; either Matthew Elmendorf was having trouble sleeping or someone at MindData Associates was working very late. She was tempted to get dressed, walk over, and demand to be admitted.

That might be dangerous, as would following any of the employees home after

work. If MindData Associates had anything to do with the mall riot and the Dunn Bridge collapse in Hannaford, they would have reason to be concerned about anyone who might connect them with that incident. And she had no real proof of any involvement, only an occasional flashback that induced a strong, persistent sense that they were somehow involved in what had happened.

"Guess I'm not the only one staying here who has insomnia," a voice said behind her.

She turned, barely able to see him in the darkness. "Mr. Zechman."

"Please—call me Marc. I was reading until I got tired enough to turn in, and thought I heard something below, on the porch. I have a good view of the street from my room, saw that young kid, the other guest here, heading over to that big house."

"MindData Associates," Chris murmured.

"They're working kind of late," Marc Zechman said.

She suddenly had the feeling that the young man, Ted, and Matthew Elmendorf were sitting in one of the offices talking about her, maybe deciding what to do about her. She stepped back from the window as the room filled with light.

She looked around and saw that Marc, his hand still on the switch, had turned on the overhead light. "Turn it off," she whispered.

"I only thought—"

"Turn it off!" She backed up, wanting to get as far away from the front windows as possible, thinking that somebody across the street might already have seen her outlined by the light.

The light went off. "Are you all right?" Marc said in the darkness.

She took a deep breath. "I'm fine," she answered. "It's just that—" For a moment she wanted to tell him about her suspicions. "I'd better go back to my room." She headed for the stairs.

Chris stood on the porch, looking across the street. The young man whom Marc Zechman had seen leaving the bed and breakfast in the middle of the night had checked out that morning, while Chris was still finishing her second cup of coffee. He had put his bags in his car after parking it in front of the inn, walked over to MindData Associates, disappeared inside their offices for a while, then returned to his car and driven away.

The waitress from the Cozy Corner hurried along the sidewalk, then crossed the street, carrying two large shopping bags by their handles. She went up the front steps of the white Victorian; the front door opened and she disappeared inside the house.

Chris left the porch and ran across the street to the building, hesitated for a moment in front of the door, then pushed it open.

The waitress stood in front of a desk with a couple of computer monitors and a keyboard. At the back of the hallway, a printer sat on top of an old table and two file cabinets stood on either side of a metal closet. Two armchairs with high backs and a loveseat were to Chris's right, facing the desk. The curly haired man who had been with Ted the day before at the Cozy Corner was rummaging in a desk drawer. He looked up as Chris approached the desk.

"Any chance of my getting in to see Matthew Elmendorf?" she asked.

The man said, "We were just about to begin a lunch hour meeting." He waved at the two shopping bags on his desk.

"Then maybe I could make an appointment."

"We're kind of busy right now." The man thrust several bills at the waitress. "Thanks, and keep the change," he said.

The young woman nodded at him. "You're welcome." She glanced at Chris as she moved toward the door.

"I'm free this afternoon," Chris said, "but if that's not possible, I can always come back tomorrow."

"I'm afraid we're really tied up today and tomorrow."

"Then maybe the day after that," Chris said.

"I'm afraid that wouldn't work, either."

"How about three days from now?"

"On Saturday? We usually take the weekends off, unless—"

"Oh, I wouldn't take up much time, and I understand Mr. Elmendorf lives in this house, and since I'm staying just across the street—"

The waitress left, closing the door behind her. "Ms. Szekely," the man said in a lower voice, "I think you'd better leave now."

"I'm willing to wait until after your meeting's over."

He frowned. "We're really tied up. You can't wait here. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got to get ready for our meeting."

She stood there, wondering what he would do if she refused to budge.

"If you don't mind—" He glared at her, as if daring her to provoke him. "If you want to talk to Matt for some news story, we really don't need any publicity at the moment."

"Maybe you do," she said. "I haven't even been able to find out exactly what your firm does, and nobody I've spoken to seems to know, either."

"I think you'd better go." He paused. "I'll tell Matt you were here."

She had the feeling that she had pushed him far enough. "Maybe I'll come back later, then." She moved toward the door, went outside, then heard footsteps behind her and the metallic snap of a door being bolted from the inside.

Chris wandered over to the library, where the librarian assured her that there was little more information about Matthew Bigelow Elmendorf and MindData Associates than what she had already seen. She searched for more items online, but found nothing that she had not already read. She walked back to the bed and breakfast to find Liane Malinowsky sitting in the front room with Catherine Alcott.

"We'll be over by six on Friday," Catherine was saying as she stood up. "Thanks for arranging this on such short notice, and now I'd better go home and tell Ceci what I'm planning."

"I thought you wanted it to be a surprise," Liane said.

"It'll be a surprise when I tell her. That's enough of a surprise without springing it on her at the last minute. She'll appreciate having some advance warning." Catherine looked up at Chris. "I'm arranging a small dinner party for my daughter's birthday."

"The waitress?" Chris asked.

"No, my other daughter, Cecilia. I thought it would be nice to have a birthday dinner for her here, just Ceci and Reine and me."

"Oh, by the way," Liane said, turning to Chris, "there was a phone call for you about a half hour ago." Chris frowned; anybody calling from Indiana would have called her on her cellphone. "Matt Elmendorf, from across the street," Liane continued. "Didn't say what he wanted, just asked if you could call him back and left me a number." She got up, fished around inside the pocket of her long sweater, and handed Chris a small piece of paper.

The number was not the MindData Associates number she had called in the past. "Thanks," Chris said. "I'll call from my room." She hurried toward the stairs and then up to her room. Her hands trembled slightly as she unlocked the door; she slammed it shut and leaned against it.

Now that she would actually get to speak to the mysterious Matt Elmendorf, she wondered what she could possibly say to him. You had something to do with that

riot, it keeps coming to me during flashbacks. If I'm thinking that, other survivors might be wondering about it, too, so maybe you'd like to tell me what's going on.

She might only be endangering herself if she voiced her suspicions. If she was going to confront him, then she should bring someone along to back her up, somebody like Joel Hickel from the Hannaford newspaper if he was still around, a large man who could look intimidating. In any case, she could prove nothing; Matt Elmendorf wouldn't even have to worry about trying to silence her because nobody would believe her.

She went to the bed, sat down, rummaged in her pocketbook for her cellphone, then thumbed his number. There were two short tinny rings and then a soft click.

"Hello," a tenor voice said.

"This is Chris Szekely. Am I speaking to Matthew Elmendorf?"

"Indeed you are."

"The proprietor of the Westview Bed and Breakfast told me you called."

"Yes. One of my associates said you dropped by earlier. Perhaps you could tell me what you wanted to speak to me about."

Chris said, "I think you know."

"I don't care for guessing games, Ms. Szekely. Enlighten me."

"Four years ago, a mob suddenly went on a rampage at a mall in Hannaford and then swarmed outside and took over the old Dunn Bridge. They had to call out the National Guard. I covered that story for WKLY."

She heard him sigh. "We lost one of our people when the bridge collapsed. Elwood Bannister—nice young fellow, not the type you'd ever think would run amok like that, but a mob is a funny thing. People do things in a crowd they'd never think of doing by themselves or in a smaller group."

"You lost two of your people," Chris said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"An electronics engineer, Simcha Olmer. You lost him, too. I remember because I was part of the mob, I was covering the story and then—" For a moment, she could not breathe. Her face burned; her heart throbbed painfully against her chest. "Afterward, I had to know who had died and who the other survivors were, see if I could find some kind of thread that might connect us, if there—" She swallowed hard and took a deep, shuddering breath. "Simcha Olmer was one of your people. He committed suicide a week after the bridge collapse, I checked the autopsy report. I'd become kind of obsessed with that riot and what had happened by then, by what could have caused such a thing. Kept looking for anything that might be connected to it, and I couldn't escape the feeling that MindData Associates had something to do with the whole thing. I was picking that up on the bridge—" Chris took another deep breath. "Other people's thoughts were leaking into mine and then there was this feeling that we weren't separate at all, that we were just one mind, and now it's happening to me again, hearing whispers inside my head, picking up all these bits and pieces that aren't my own thoughts."

Matthew Elmendorf was silent for a while. "I assume you've consulted a therapist."

"Oh, yes, but I never mentioned anything about picking up other people's thoughts and feelings during the riot because I couldn't really remember much of what had happened afterward, and I didn't want him to think I was completely crazy, but now—it's almost as if it's all coming back to me, everything I forgot before."

She had said too much, babbled on for too long. She waited for him to say something to her.

"Simcha Olmer was a depressive," he said at last. "Things hit him a lot harder than they did other people. I often wish I'd paid more attention to that, urged him more strongly to seek help." He paused. "But that has nothing to do with your problem."

"If I'm having these kinds of reactions, these memories, maybe other people are, too, other survivors. I might be the first person to have come here looking for some kind of connection to what happened, but I doubt I'll be the last."

"Ms. Szekely, this isn't the sort of discussion that we should be having over the phone. Perhaps you should stop by our offices. If you have the time, maybe you could come over right now."

"Very well." Chris was suddenly wary. "I'll be sure to let the innkeepers know where I'm going."

"I'll expect you in, oh, about ten minutes."

As she crossed the street, Chris kept wanting to turn back. It would soon be evening and, judging by the empty parking spaces near the MindData building, most if not all of the company's employees had already left. Now that Matthew Elmendorf had agreed to a meeting, she worried that she might be putting herself in danger. If his company were connected with what had happened in Hannaford, he would have every reason to get rid of anyone who might uncover such a connection.

Absurd, she told herself as she climbed the front steps. If Elmendorf had any such end in mind, he would not have called and left a message with Liane Malinowsky, or invited her over for a chat knowing that Liane and her husband would be aware of where she was going.

She tried the knob, then pushed the door open. Matthew Elmendorf, whose unruly white hair was even longer than it had been in the photo she had seen, sat in one of the armchairs. He was a small man, smaller than she had expected, and the expression on his face was almost kindly.

"Come in," he said, smiling.

She closed the door and walked toward him. "Please sit down," he continued. "You still resemble your photograph, the one I used to see on the side of a few buses in Hannaford, in those ads for your television station. I can't say that I ever watched your news program, even though, in different ways, we're both in the same line of work."

"We are?" Chris said.

"Communications. If I were to sum up what MindData Associates is about in one word, that would be the word I'd use, communications. Now what was it that you wanted to discuss?"

She sat down and gripped the chair's armrests. "I don't know if you can understand what it's like, knowing that you were part of a mob that went completely bat-shit crazy like that. I told my therapist something else must have made us act that way, and he kept saying that that was just a way for me to keep from owning what had happened."

He gazed at her with the kind of warm, sympathetic look that she had never glimpsed on Dr. Perrin's face. "Did you offer your therapist any ideas about what that something else might be?"

"No. What would be the point? Especially since a lot of the time, I wasn't really sure what I thought, whether—" She took a breath. "For a while, I couldn't remember anything much, just bits and pieces. Even now I can't recall a lot of what happened that night."

"Seems to me you'd be better off forgetting it entirely. Amnesia can be the mind's way of protecting itself."

The back of her neck ached with tension. "I have to ask you this. Has anyone else who survived the riot come here looking for you?"

His smile faded. "Are you thinking that if someone had, this would somehow verify your suspicions?"

"I just want to know."

"Ms. Szekely, take my advice. Leave Westview and try to put your unfortunate experience behind you."

"I know that MindData Associates got some funding from the Defense Department."

He frowned. "I didn't know that television news personalities actually did much real investigation."

She leaned back in her chair. She wasn't picking up anything from him, not even the faint almost inaudible whispers she had been picking up around other people ever since coming to Westview. Instead, she felt a stuffiness in her ears and head, the kind of sensation that usually meant she was coming down with a cold. "This was funding from a couple of years back," she said. "I couldn't find a line for you in the most recent figures. Of course that might just mean I wasn't looking in the right place."

"That we've had some government contracts is a matter of public record."

"Technically I suppose that's true, even if it means taking ages for anybody to find a trace of those records."

"Go home, Ms. Szekely—it would be better for you and for the people of Westview."

"I didn't realize you were all that concerned about the people here."

"One can't help taking an interest in one's community, even when one prefers to spend much of one's time alone doing one's work. We've contributed our share to the local economy, there's even talk of a new business or two opening up here soon. It's been gratifying to know that we've been of some help in keeping the town going."

She said, "I suppose you think that makes up for what happened in Hannaford."

"You have no evidence that we had anything to do with that."

"Somebody else will start wondering, another survivor. Maybe they'll start poking around and asking questions about why one of your people committed suicide and another was on the bridge that night. I can't be the only one remembering, having flashbacks and weird feelings, thinking I'm picking up other people's thoughts." She shook her head. "It's funny. Ever since I came back here, every once in a while, it's been like I can hear what somebody else is thinking. Yesterday I was sitting in that restaurant, the Cozy Corner, and then I was looking at this woman who had come in and knowing that she had lost her husband and was still mourning for him and—" She sighed. "And for just a second, it was like I was looking at myself through her eyes."

Matthew Elmendorf leaned forward and peered at her with a wide-eyed look of surprise and curiosity.

"You think I imagined it," she continued, "but other survivors will start having the same suspicions. Maybe somebody else is already wondering about what happened and maybe the only reason they haven't done anything about it is that they don't want people to think they're crazy, that it's better just to forget. But somebody'll do something eventually, start blogging about the riot or trying to contact other survivors, and if there are enough of us and we ask enough questions, maybe we can find out the truth."

He stood up. "Good night, Ms. Szekely."

She got to her feet. "I may head into Hannaford tomorrow. Maybe I can find out more there."

"Good night."

She turned and moved toward the door, forcing herself not to look back at him.

Her threat to drive into Hannaford and snoop around had been an empty one. She managed to get as far as the highway that looped through the eastern suburbs before turning back, and even getting that close to the city had made her palms sweat so much that they kept slipping from the steering wheel.

Her eyes felt gritty and she still ached with fatigue, even though she had not made it out of bed until almost noon. Maybe she should take Matt Elmendorf's advice, she

thought as she drove toward Westview. There was nothing more she could do here; there was nothing to link MindData Associates to the Hannaford riot except the possibly coincidental deaths of two of its employees and scraps of her possibly mistaken memories. Maybe it would be easier simply to accept that she was suffering from a mental disorder than to keep thinking that some unknown force was responsible for all of those deaths.

She came to the exit, slowed down on the ramp, and continued into Westview, passing the convenience store and the Cozy Corner. As she approached the bed and breakfast, the front door opened and two people stepped out to the porch. She recognized Catherine Alcott, and the white-haired man with her was Matthew Elmendorf.

Brad Malinowsky had become extremely solicitous of the old man as soon as he'd entered the inn, hurrying up to him, offering him a chair, asking if there was anything else he could do.

"He hardly ever comes over here," Liane Malinowsky whispered to Catherine as they entered the sitting room.

"Who?" Catherine asked absently.

"Matthew Elmendorf, the man who runs MindData Associates."

Catherine was suddenly curious. Liane seemed about to say something else when the old man stood up. "Hello, Ms. Malinowsky," he said to Liane, then turned to Catherine. "Pardon me, ma'am, but I don't believe we've met."

She was touched by his old-fashioned courtesy. "Catherine Alcott," she said, extending her arm.

"Matt Elmendorf," the old man responded as he clasped her hand.

"Catherine lives in that big gray house just behind our parking lot," Liane said.

"You probably haven't seen me before," Catherine said, "because I've been kind of—well, keeping to myself." The man offered her a smile. "But I think you know my daughter Reine."

"Yes, of course," Matthew Elmendorf said. He glanced at Brad. "I came over because I'll be bringing in a larger number of consultants at the beginning of next month. I might need all of your rooms."

Brad nodded. "I'll have to double-check our reservations, but I'm pretty sure we can accommodate you."

"My colleagues have often told me how much they appreciated your place, how comfortable they were here, how much nicer it was than staying in a hotel. They'll be here throughout the first week, starting on Monday."

Brad went to the desk by the staircase and opened up his laptop. "If you need us to arrange for a reception, or special dinner," Liane said, "we can do that, too. We're putting on a small dinner party for Catherine tomorrow evening, a birthday celebration for her daughter, but we can handle a larger group, and we can serve beer and wine on the premises."

Matthew Elmendorf smiled. "I'll keep that in mind."

"As I suspected," Brad said from the desk, "we'll be able to accommodate your group next month."

"Then I'll come over this weekend and make the final arrangements." The old man got to his feet. "I'd better get back to work."

"And I'd better head home," Catherine said as she stood up and followed Matthew Elmendorf to the door; he held it open for her. "Nice to meet you at last," she murmured as she stepped outside. "We both apparently have one thing in common, namely being hermits, except that I've been even more reclusive than you."

"I'm actually not that solitary, Ms. Alcott," he said in his gentle voice. "There are my coworkers, and the consultants we bring in, and an occasional business trip. It's just that I don't have much of a life apart from my work."

They lingered by the door. She had met him only a few moments ago, but was already feeling that she could talk to him. "At least you have an excuse," she said. "I just retreated into myself, I didn't even see what it was doing to my daughters. Ceci has a job in Hannaford that she only took so that she could help Reine look after me, and Reine should be spending more time on her paintings."

"Her paintings?"

"She was finishing her master's in fine arts when her father died." Catherine's voice caught. "When he was killed." She shuddered. "A stray bullet from a kid's gun, he didn't even mean to do it, Jon just happened to be—"

"I understand," Elmendorf said, and she felt that he did.

She swallowed hard, remembering again, then took a deep breath. "And now, after all this time mourning him, I feel—I don't know how to explain it. One day I woke up and I felt like staying alive after all. It isn't that I've stopped grieving, I don't know that I ever will stop missing Jon, but I was able to get out of bed and feel like doing something instead of just lying there, as if something had been switched on in my brain. And I knew what I had to do, pull myself together and get ready to look after myself so that my daughters could stop worrying about me and live their own lives."

Catherine fell silent and was suddenly embarrassed. "I understand," Matthew Elmendorf said. "I've had my own losses. It can take a while to get past them."

"It's strange. Not only did I get up feeling better, but my daughters seemed happier, too. Ceci actually looked happy about going to her job for once."

"Hope she enjoys her party."

"Please feel free to stop by for a drink here tomorrow," Catherine said impulsively. "My girls and I probably can't finish all the wine by ourselves." The man was the head of what was apparently a thriving business; there might eventually be an opening there for Ceci or Reine, something better than the jobs they had now.

A red Subaru came down the street, then slowed; Catherine saw that Chris Szekely was behind the wheel. "Poor thing," Matthew Elmendorf said as the car entered the inn's parking lot. "That incident, the Hannaford riot," he continued. "You've heard the story, I'm sure."

Catherine nodded.

He shook his head. "She still hasn't gotten over it, I'm afraid. Maybe she never will. Seems to have made her a bit—unbalanced. She'll probably keep looking for someone to blame, some sort of explanation for what happened, instead of simply accepting that it was most likely a kind of mass hysteria."

Catherine glanced to her left. Chris Szekely was out of her car; she crossed the grass and came to the walkway that led to the porch, then looked up. "What are you doing here?" she called out. She was staring at Matthew Elmendorf. Catherine wondered why she sounded so beligerent, so angry.

The old man frowned. "I don't know that it's any of your business."

The blond woman seemed bewildered. She came up the steps and stopped in front of Catherine, searched her face, then rushed past her into the inn, slamming the door behind her.

"As I was saying," Matthew Elmendorf murmured. He touched his head, as if tipping an invisible hat, and went down the steps.

She should welcome the silence, the feeling of being enveloped by an invisible cocoon, of being completely inside herself. But when she had been standing in front of Catherine Alcott, waiting and expecting to overhear the whisper of her thoughts, the silence had been oppressive, too thick and heavy around her, making it hard even to hear her own inner voice.

The silence was a threat.

Chris lay on her bed, wondering if she was coming down with flu, telling herself yet again that she should pack and leave the next morning. Matthew Elmendorf had sounded both concerned and vaguely menacing while advising her to leave Westview. There was nothing more for her to accomplish here.

At last she sat up and slipped her feet into her shoes. The Cozy Corner would be closed by now, but there were places to eat along the highway. She would look for a promising restaurant, something that wasn't either a greasy spoon or too expensive, and plan her trip home while she dined. If she got enough sleep and an early start, maybe she could just drive straight through and make it back to her apartment by Saturday.

Chris went to the mirror over the dresser, ran her fingers through her hair, then left the room. As she came down the stairs, she heard the sound of voices in the sitting room.

"...shot in the arm for us," Brad Malinowsky was saying. "Things are usually slow for us right up until Memorial Day."

"Saw him outside earlier today, while I was taking my early morning walk." That was Marc Zechman's voice, although it sounded muffled, as though she had cotton stuffed in her ears. "He was standing on the sidewalk while some young guy was hanging out of an upstairs window fiddling with that satellite dish. What I don't understand is why it's aimed toward your place instead of up at the sky."

"One of their guys told me about that," Brad said as Chris entered the room. "They shut it down to make repairs, said it's easier to fix the machine when it's pointed this way."

"And you believe that?" Chris suddenly realized that she had said it aloud.

Brad, who sat in a corner chair with his laptop on his knees, looked up. "I have no reason not to believe it."

Marc Zechman, wearing his trench coat, stood up. "I'd better be going. Thanks for the recommendation." He glanced at Chris, looked down at the carpet, then lifted his head. "By the way, have you eaten dinner yet?"

Chris shook her head. "No, I haven't."

"Then maybe you wouldn't mind being my guest." His arms hung awkwardly at his sides. "I wouldn't mind having some company."

"I recommended a place called Arlo's," Brad said. "Good food, reasonable prices, a halfway decent wine list, popular with the locals, and it's only a fifteen-minute drive from here."

Chris hesitated. Marc Zechman shifted his weight from one foot to the other; he looked extremely embarrassed, as if he had not asked anyone to dinner for some time.

"Fine," she replied.

When they reached the highway, Chris's spirits lifted. By the time they were seated at Arlo's, which turned out to be a small, crowded restaurant with a menu that featured steak, chicken, and pasta dishes, her head was clearer and she was sure that she wasn't coming down with a cold. By the time she had finished her dinner and had allowed Marc to talk her into sharing half of his strawberry shortcake, she knew that he was getting divorced and had been traveling around the country for almost two months. He had said little about his wife and his business, much more about the cities and towns he had stopped in during his extended road trip. He was thinking of settling in a new place, perhaps in one of the towns he had explored.

"Didn't think there'd be that much to Westview," Marc said as the waitress brought them two cups of coffee. "Figured I'd stop here for a couple of days and check out Hannaford, but now I'm thinking of staying on for a while, and I still haven't made it into Hannaford. I've just been wandering around town and talking to people."

"Really?" Chris said. "And what have they been telling you?"

"A lot of the younger people have moved away, which isn't surprising, I guess. The ones that are still here have jobs in Hannaford for the most part. The owner of Et Cetera, that collectibles place near the library, told me that, a few years ago, he was wondering how long he could keep going, and now, between his Internet business and the customers at his shop, he's actually been doing all right. The guy at Memory Lane, the antiques store, told me the same thing, Westview was dying, and then things started picking up, not long after MindData Associates moved in."

Chris set down her coffee cup. "Probably just a coincidence," she said.

"Maybe not. The town librarian told me that he thinks the consultants they bring in might have helped turn things around. They come here, patronize the local businesses, mention them to other people when they get home, and pretty soon more people from out of town are ordering things online from Et Cetera or from Books and More or stopping here when they're on vacation. That's his theory, anyway."

Marc was still expounding on the librarian's theory as they left the restaurant and got into his car. Another bit of evidence supporting his suppositions was the apparent success of the Westview Bed and Breakfast, given that people brought in by MindData Associates filled rooms during the off-season that might otherwise have remained empty. Then there was Dan's Cozy Corner, where the waitress had admitted to him that MindData Associates provided a good share of the eatery's profits. Now there was talk of a couple of new businesses opening up in a town some had been ready to give up on just a few years ago.

"Compared to some of the places I've been through lately," Marc continued, "Westview isn't a bad place. As I said, I wouldn't mind staying on for a while, maybe finding something I could do."

"Like what?" she asked.

"Maybe starting a new business, or investing in one here. The thing is, I've been missing my old routines. Retirement isn't what it's cracked up to be. A lot of the time, it's just sitting around with too much time on your hands."

They were approaching Westview. Except for the bright lights of the service station and convenience store, and the dimmer streetlights that lined the sidewalks, the rest of the town was dark. Chris said, "I'm thinking of checking out and heading home tomorrow."

"Back to Indiana?"

"Yes."

"Never been to Indiana," he said. "Maybe it's time I saw it."

Was he hinting at following her back? The car slowed as they neared the inn's parking lot. The lights were still on at the MindData Associates building on both the first and second floors, and she saw the silhouette of a man in one of the third floor windows.

Because of Matthew Elmendorf people had died, and not easily, trapped in anguish and despair, falling from the bridge, crushed by boulders of asphalt and steel girders and the bodies of other people. "You're one of the lucky ones," a doctor had told her. She still could not recall much about the medical people who had fished her out of the water and taped her fractured ribs, or the short stay in the hospital before they sent her home, but there had been nightmares after that, dreams of people falling around her as she dropped toward the black river below. She had always awokened, screaming, before she hit the water. Matthew Elmendorf owed her for that; he owed even more to all those people who had died around her.

"What?" The car had stopped. "What did you say?" Marc asked.

Chris groped blindly at the door on her side, pushed it open, and stumbled outside. Her legs nearly buckled under her as she leaned against the car.

"Are you all right?" A hand gripped her elbow. "Is there anything I can do?"

She took a breath. "It's nothing."

"You were saying something about being owed something, and then you—"

"I'm all right."

"At least let me help you inside."

She stood there while he locked his car, then allowed him to take her arm and lead her up the steps to the porch. As he opened the door, she turned to look at the lighted windows across the street.

Marc ate his breakfast of bran flakes alone. Even Liane, who usually came into the dining room every few minutes to check the coffee pot, was in the kitchen, preparing for a dinner party the inn was arranging for somebody that evening.

He got up and went into the front room, then over to the window that faced the parking lot. Chris Szekely's car was gone; maybe she had already checked out. He felt a pang of disappointment, then crossed to the front door and went outside.

The sky was clear, the air already warm; he wouldn't need to go back to his room for his coat. He hurried down the steps to the sidewalk, ready for another day of aimless wandering and imagining that he might decide to settle here.

As he rounded the corner, he saw a woman sweeping the front steps of the large gray house next to the inn's parking lot. Her brown hair was pulled back, revealing white streaks at the temples; her denim shirt and jeans hung loosely on her slender frame. A middle-aged woman, he thought, someone far more appropriate for him than Chris Szekely. Nora might have had streaks like that in her hair if she hadn't insisted on having it tinted and highlighted.

His throat seized up at the thought of Nora. He could still drive west, lose himself in yet another unfamiliar place, without trailing Chris Szekely like a stalker. Foolish to think that a fling with her would ease the pain of losing Nora.

The woman looked up. Her sharp-featured face seemed familiar; he must have seen her before, perhaps while he was taking one of his walks.

"Hello," he said, realizing with embarrassment that he was staring.

She nodded at him. He was about to walk on when she said, "I think I've seen you before, even though I'm sure we haven't met. Are you staying at the bed and breakfast?"

"Yes, I am."

"Maybe that's why." She came down the steps, still clutching the broom. "I must have seen you in passing." She pointed her chin at him. "It's only recently that I've taken much of an interest in anything outside my home." Her gray eyes held him, and then she looked away. "I'm Catherine Alcott."

"Then I believe I've met your daughter Reine," he said, "at the Cozy Corner." He extended his hand. "Marc Zechman."

She shook his hand lightly, then drew back. "Glad to meet you. How long have you been in Westview?" She lowered her eyes. "Listen to me, interrogating you right after meeting you." Her face grew pink. "I'm still not quite used to talking to other people, except for my daughters."

The feeling that he had met her before persisted. She continued, "But I feel as though I can talk to you. Weird, isn't it?"

"I've been here for a few days," he said. "I was thinking of leaving soon." At the moment, he did not want to leave at all. "Reine told me a bit about herself, about her job and her sister and your—" He paused. "Your loss."

"You mean my husband." Her eyes filled over. "It's better for me now than it was. At least now I'm up to things like cleaning the house and walking around town and arranging a birthday dinner for my daughter."

"For Reine?"

"No, Ceci, my other girl. Today's her birthday, so I've arranged a birthday dinner for

us at the bed and breakfast tonight. Maybe—" She glanced past him, then continued, "Please feel free to join us there for a drink if you like, sometime around six or so. I ordered some wine for the party, and Reine's boss said he'd come by for a few moments, and I invited the man who owns that business across the street, MindData Associates, so if you'd like—"

"That's very kind of you."

"It might make it more like a party for Ceci. It's been hard for her here, taking a job she doesn't much care for and not having any social life to speak of. She hasn't made any real friends at work from what I can tell and there aren't many people her age in Westview. Maybe I can talk that troubled young blonde into joining us, too, if I run into her before then. She seems like somebody who could use a little kindness."

"I think she might have checked out already," Marc said.

"Are you sure? Reine saw her this morning, said she was acting kind of strange, pacing back and forth in the parking lot at MindData Associates with an upset look on her face. Reine was concerned enough to call me, said that she waved at her and said hello but got no response at all."

"I had dinner with her last night," Marc said. "She told me she was thinking of leaving today." He thought of how Chris Szekely had almost collapsed getting out of his car, the way she had muttered something about what was owed to her. She hadn't drunk that much wine at dinner, but maybe she was somebody with a low tolerance for alcohol.

"I spoke to her yesterday—" Catherine Alcott paused. "I think—" She was gazing past him. He turned as a red Subaru sped past them; he caught a glimpse of Chris Szekely's blond hair as the car rounded the corner, passed the inn's parking lot, and continued down the street.

Ted and Bob had come in for an early lunch. Reine had just served them their usual orders as the blond TV reporter pushed the front door open, slamming it into the wall with a bang.

The woman's mouth twitched; she looked around the room, then turned toward Reine and her two customers. She had looked out of it that morning, so lost in her own misery that she had not even responded to Reine's greeting. Now she was tense, her hands curled into fists, her face pale.

"What can I get you?" Reine asked.

The woman came toward her, then turned toward the men. Bob looked uneasy; Ted had his arm curled protectively around his plate.

"I finally went back there," the woman said. "Didn't know if I could face it again, but I drove there and stood on that new bridge and looked out at the river and the place where the old bridge used to be."

The two men were silent. Reine backed toward the counter.

"You were working for him back then, weren't you," the woman continued. "Both of you, when your offices were still in Hannaford. I know you were, I'm sure of it, you had to be." She was looking at Ted. "What did you think you were doing?"

Ted pushed back his chair and slowly got to his feet. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"What did you think you were doing? Doesn't it ever bother you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Ted repeated.

"You know damn well what I'm talking about. It started coming back to me today, what happened that night, what I was hearing inside my head. Something went wrong, somebody screwed up big time, that's what I heard that night, along with all of those thoughts from everybody around me that I couldn't shut off. Somebody better shut down that transponder. Somebody messed up. And I knew it was something your people, MindData Associates, had done."

Ted said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You thought it was all over, that anybody who survived wouldn't know enough to come after you, would be too traumatized to want to do anything but forget. We'd think it was mass hysteria, picking up other people's thoughts like that. We'd blame ourselves for what happened, not you." The woman swung around to face Reine. "Don't trust them. It'll come out eventually, it has to."

Bob reached under his jacket and pulled out a cellphone; his thumb moved over the surface. "I know you've been through a bad time," Ted said. Bob was whispering into his cellphone. "Wish there was something we could do to help."

"Don't trust them," the woman said to Reine, and then she stumbled toward the door, yanked it open, and ran outside.

Ceci's coworkers had surprised her with a birthday cake and a card signed by everybody in her department. Then her supervisor Steve had surprised her again by telling her that she could leave a couple of hours early after she had mentioned that her mother was planning a party for her that evening.

"Nice of him," her mother's voice said into her ear. Ceci smiled, steering her car lefthandedly while clutching her cellphone with her right. She had worried that her mother might have lapsed into depression again, or even cancelled the birthday dinner, but she sounded quite cheerful as she chattered on about what she had planned for that night. There would be crabmeat and avocado salad to start, then grilled salmon for the main course, and Brad Malinowsky had helped her select the wines. She had also invited the man who ran the business across the street to stop by the inn just before dinner.

"It can't hurt," her mother went on. "He might be hiring in the future."

"Are you thinking of me?"

"Actually, I was thinking more of your sister."

"Because I don't know if I'd want a job in Westview," Ceci said. "I was thinking of looking for another position in Hannaford and maybe getting an apartment there." This idea had come to her only that morning, but she had been toying with it ever since.

"Ah, the best of both worlds," her mother said. "Far enough away to have your own life and close enough so that Reine and I could still see you fairly often."

"That's what I was thinking."

"Oh, and I invited one of the guests at the inn to your party. Hope you don't mind—he's a retired businessman. Thought of asking the other guest, too, but—" She paused. "I hope you're not driving, Cecilia. Did you at least pull over?"

"Um," Ceci replied.

"Then I'm hanging up. You know it's against the law."

Her mother disconnected. Ceci dropped her cellphone in her lap. Maybe she wouldn't look for another job just yet, now that her boss and coworkers were acting more congenial, but she would look for her own place. She had expected her mother to object to that, and instead she had sounded sympathetic.

Her good mood held until she was driving down the street toward her house. A blond woman stood on the front steps of the bed and breakfast, talking into a cellphone. For a moment, the back of Ceci's neck prickled with apprehension, and then the feeling passed.

Chris said, "I'm sure of it now. You're responsible for what happened. While I was standing there, it all came back to me."

"Baseless accusations," Matt Elmendorf said. "You shouldn't have called."

"Then you shouldn't have given me your private number." Hand shaking, she nearly dropped her cellphone.

"I meant that you shouldn't be talking to me. You should be consulting a therapist. You need help, Ms. Szekely."

"I phoned an old friend while I was in Hannaford," Chris said. "I think he'll be very interested in finding out more about your operation, especially if anything happens to me." She did not have to tell him that she had only been able to leave a voice mail for Joel Hickel, or that the newspaperman was someone she had known only slightly. Joel would probably be curious enough to call her back, and if he didn't, she would keep trying until she got through. In the meantime, she wanted Matt Elmendorf to feel at least some of the fear that haunted her. Throw him off, she thought, get him nervous enough, and he might make a mistake that could lead to his exposure.

Matt Elmendorf said, "Go home."

She disconnected and thrust the phone into her purse. He might already be plotting some way to get at her, but she would be gone before he even knew she had left town. Elmendorf did not know whom she had called in Hannaford, something else that might give him second thoughts about coming after her. Joel would call back, or she would finally get hold of him, and between them, they would figure out some way to get at the truth about MindData Associates.

She went inside. Brad Malinowsky stood at the check-in desk. "Excuse me," she said. "I've decided to leave on Sunday—Sunday morning."

He looked up from the register. "Staying for the brunch?"

"I don't know."

"Check-out time isn't until eleven, so—"

"Maybe I will, then." She would not tell him that she planned to leave early tomorrow morning. "But I'd like to settle up the bill now."

"Sure."

She rummaged in her purse for her wallet. "By the way," Brad said, "we're putting on a small birthday dinner tonight, and the woman who hired us asked me to invite you to have a glass of wine beforehand with the party. She invited our other guest, too, Mr. Zechman; she just called a few minutes ago to say she'd spoken to him already. Catherine Alcott—she's the one who asked us to do the dinner."

"That's very kind of her," Chris said, pulling a credit card from her wallet. She had no intention of taking Catherine Alcott up on her invitation. She would leave late tonight instead of early tomorrow, put as much distance as possible between her and Westview before anyone realized she was gone.

"Can't stay long," Dan said to Reine as they neared the bed and breakfast, "but it was nice of your mother to ask me."

"You gave me a job when I needed one," Reine said. "It's about time she invited you to something."

They climbed the steps to the porch; the door was flung open. Ceci stood there, wearing a blue silk shirt and black skirt, her reddish hair piled on her head.

"Happy birthday," Reine said, surprised to see her sister so dressed up.

"And a happy birthday from me," Dan added.

"Come on in." Ceci beckoned them inside and closed the door. Dan greeted Brad Malinowsky, who ushered him toward the dining room; Ceci and Reine followed. "At first I thought this dinner idea was really lame," Ceci murmured to Reine, "but now I'm glad Mom decided to do it."

"Me too."

Their mother stood by the sideboard, sipping a glass of wine with Matthew Elmendorf. Reine moved toward them, ready to enjoy herself.

Chris heard the voices from her room. She had almost finished packing and could

now lie down and rest while waiting for everybody to leave and for the Malinowskys and Marc Zechman to go to bed. She would slip out of the inn after that. If she didn't get a call from Joel Hickel before she left, she would try him again in the morning.

She stretched out on the bed, unable to make out what the people downstairs were saying. Occasionally a distinct word or a phrase floated to the top of the sea of cheerful murmuring:

"... so glad . . ."

"Hey!"

"... gonna . . ."

"... a while ago, since then I've just been . . ." That was Marc Zechman's voice; he was telling somebody about his retirement and his travels.

The voices faded into a soothing hum. The pressure against her ears had returned, making her wish that she could go to sleep and never wake up.

"... seeing some of her art." She recognized the voice of Catherine Alcott. "... did some freelance work in graphics..."

"... like to take a look at it sometime." Chris tensed at the sound of Matthew Elmendorf's voice. "... might need somebody . . . designer . . ."

She sat up, suddenly awake. Murderer, she thought. All those people downstairs didn't know what he really was, but they wouldn't want to know. He was simply the kindly old guy who had given their dying town a shot in the arm. They would not thank anybody for exposing what he had done. They would all rather keep on believing that their thoughts would always be surrounded by unbreachable walls.

She got up, pulled her cellphone from her purse, and punched in Joel's number. "Joel Hickel is not available to take your call," a metallic voice said. "Please leave a message after the tone." She disconnected and set the phone down on the night table.

Someone was coming up the stairs. The footsteps stopped; there was a knock on her door. "Chris?" Marc Zechman asked.

She was silent.

"Chris? You're welcome to join everybody downstairs for a drink." He paused. "Maybe we could go out to dinner afterward."

He knew she was here. She went to the door. "I'm not feeling too well," she said through the door.

"Anything serious? What are your symptoms?"

"Oh, it's nothing, really, just—" She paused. "I'm just tired. Guess I haven't been getting enough sleep."

"Maybe a glass of wine would help you sleep better."

The waitress from the Cozy Corner would be downstairs. After the way Chris had acted at the café that day, the woman probably thought she was crazy. The woman's mother had grounds to doubt her sanity, too, and Chris had no desire to be in the same room as Elmendorf.

Just thinking of him made her almost dizzy with anger. She had to hide up here, cowering in her room, because of him. Maybe he would leave if she came downstairs.

"All right," she said. "Please, just give me a moment, will you? I'll be down in just a bit."

"Sure. That young woman whose birthday it is turned twenty-three today. Makes me feel old."

"You and me both."

The key to her room was inside the side pocket of her slacks; Chris had left her purse upstairs. When she reached the bottom of the stairs, she was suddenly tempted to turn back. Matthew Elmendorf was seated at a table by the window, across from a pretty young woman with thick chestnut hair.

"Hello." The tall lanky man with graying hair who had recognized her at the Cozy Corner stepped in front of her. "Dan Howell." He thrust his right hand at her. She shook it and focused on the glass of wine he held in his left hand, trying to avoid a glance in Elmendorf's direction.

Catherine Alcott came to her side, trailed by Marc Zechman. "I'm glad you decided to come," she said. "You must be—I hope you're feeling better. What would you like? I can offer you chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, or merlot."

Brad Malinowsky was at the sideboard, arranging a platter of appetizers. The waitress from the Cozy Corner said something to him, then moved toward Elmendorf. The stuffiness in Chris's ears was a throb.

"What would you like?" Catherine asked again; her voice was faint.

Elmendorf took a sip from a glass, set it down, and took what looked like a BlackBerry from his pocket. He pressed it with his thumbs, looking as though he was texting somebody, and her ears suddenly cleared.

"... keep away from her, she's just climbing out of a really dark place, leave her alone or..."

"... still miss him, I'll never..."

"... got something for you right over here..."

The voices were inside her head. Chris took a step backward.

"What are you gonna do now, go nuts like you did at my place?" Chris had said those words out loud, but the words did not belong to her. She turned to face the owner of the Cozy Corner. "Way to go, bitch, scaring off my best customers." His lips did not move.

"What did you say?" The man shook his head at her. "You all right, lady?" he continued.

She wanted to cover her ears, even knowing that this would not mute the voices. Elmendorf seemed to be aiming his BlackBerry at her.

"Fuck me, baby, fuck me, I could take you right here on this floor." That was Marc.

"Dan told me what you said in his place, crazy shit, we put everything into this place, and you want to scare off the guys keeping us afloat." That was Brad Malinowsky.

Catherine Alcott handed her a glass. "I should never have invited you." Catherine was smiling, but her eyes darted about nervously. "You better not screw up Ceci's party." Chris's hand shook; the glass fell from her hand and shattered on the hard wood floor.

"Clumsy bitch." That was Liane Malinowsky. "Don't worry," she continued in a voice outside Chris's head. "I'll take care of it."

"Are you all right?" Catherine Alcott asked, and then: "You are going to mess up my daughter's party, aren't you."

Chris stumbled toward Matthew Elmendorf. "You're doing this to me," she muttered.

The young woman sitting with him gaped at her. "Go ahead, mess it up for Mom just when she's getting better."

"Stop it," Chris said. "What are you trying to do to me?"

The voices rose, shrieking, their words washed away by a wave of rage and despair.

"What are you trying to do to me?" Chris Szekely said. Catherine could barely hear what she was saying to Matthew Elmendorf. Everyone in the room was staring at the blond woman. Ceci looked frightened. Matt Elmendorf glanced up for a moment, then peered down at his hand-held device, as if checking for messages.

"My God," Reine whispered to her.

This is my fault, Catherine thought. She had forgotten how to deal with other people, and now this woman, whose instability had been obvious right from the start, was wrecking her daughter's evening.

Chris gasped for air, feeling as though the wall of anger and hopelessness would crush her. "Just stop it. Stop it!"

A hand gripped her arm. Someone propelled her away from the table. Marc Zechman was saying something to her, but the shrieking drowned him out. She sensed the threat inside him; he was ready to throw her to the floor and force himself on her.

She struggled against him. "Let me go." She managed to pull away. "Leave me alone!"

"Leave me alone!" Chris's pale face was mottled with red patches.

"I'm only trying to help," Marc said.

"Get away from me." She threw up her hands, then swung at him; he threw up his arms and caught the blow. "Get out of my head!"

Chris stumbled toward Matt Elmendorf, then looked back. "You don't know what he is, you don't know what he's done." She turned back to the old man. "People are dead because of you."

Elmendorf leaned back, still holding his BlackBerry. "Something went wrong, made a mistake, learned, that kind of thing won't happen again. Girl must have been more sensitive to begin with, and now more exposure . . ." The voice cut through the shrieking and screaming, harsher and sharper than his usual gentle tone; he was inside her, impossible to escape. "She should have died with the rest of them, she would have been better off."

Chris suddenly dropped to her knees, then fell forward, curling up on the floor with her arms wrapped around herself.

The shrieking abruptly broke off. Chris lay on the floor for a long time, unable to move.

"Stand back," someone said in a muffled voice. She opened her eyes. Matthew Elmendorf stared down at her, his colleague Ted just behind him. "Give her room to breathe."

Ted said, "Better get her something to drink."

"I don't want anything from you." Her throat was sore; the words came out in a croak.

Matthew Elmendorf said, "She needs air." He grabbed her right hand and pulled her to a sitting position; Ted gripped her left arm and helped her to her feet. "We're going outside, Ms. Szekely," he continued. "Some fresh air'll do you good." Catherine Alcott came up to them, a bewildered look on her face. "Go back to your party," Elmendorf said to her. "We'll look out for her, see if there's anything we can do, don't want you worrying about this, just go and enjoy yourself."

The two men, hanging on to her so tightly that it hurt, led her into the front room and then out to the porch. Ted let go of her; Elmendorf guided her to a chair.

"Feeling better?" he asked as she sat down. She shook off his hand. In the dim light, he looked as though he was smiling. "Good thing Ted was working late. Came right over when I called."

"Got some Ambien in the office," Ted said. "Might help you calm down and get some sleep."

"I don't want anything from you." She stared across the street. The lights were still on at Elmendorf's building, the big satellite dish still aimed at the bed and breakfast. "What did you do to me, anyway?"

"Nothing," the old man said, "nothing at all. You've been under a lot of stress, Ms. Szekely. You should get a good night's sleep and then drive home and get a long rest."

Chris rested her head against the back of the chair. She was already having trouble recalling exactly what had happened that evening. Was it the café owner whose rage had nearly overwhelmed her, or Marc Zechman? No, there had been something

else inside Marc, something obscene. It came to her now that she had picked up something from Elmendorf, too, something about herself, and then that thought faded, becoming as elusive as an early childhood memory.

"Go away," Chris said, "just leave me alone."

Matthew Elmendorf bowed slightly toward her, then started down the steps, followed by Ted. She would have to go back to her room and wait and leave later on, as she had intended. She closed her eyes, unable to move, feeling spent and empty.

Chris had still not come back inside even after Dan Howell had left. Marc went to look for her and found her alone on the porch, asleep in one of the wicker chairs.

"Chris," he said. She started up and threw one arm across her face. "Dan Howell left by the back door already, said he had to get home to his wife. Thought maybe—" He sat down in the chair next to hers. "I can take you to dinner if you like, or bring something back for you."

"I'm not hungry." Her voice was flat.

"Can I do anything for you?"

"Just leave me alone."

"It's getting cold. You'll freeze out here." He waited, then reached for her hand. She tensed, as if to pull away, then let him help her up. He guided her inside; she walked stiffly, arms hanging at her sides, her back straight. In the dining room, Catherine and her daughters sat at the table near the window; they glanced warily in his direction.

Chris said, "I can get upstairs by myself."

"You sure?"

She nodded and left them. Marc waited at the bottom of the staircase, listening to the slow, steady thump of her footsteps as she climbed the steps.

Marc drove to Arlo's, intending to grab a quick bite before heading back to Westview, but the waitress was slow to take his order and the chef took nearly an hour to throw his sandwich together; he had finished two Scotches by the time the food arrived. There was another long wait over coffee for the bill: He got back to the inn to find the place in darkness, the party clearly over; Chris Szekely's ravings and fit of hysteria had probably put the damper on the celebration. The only light still on was the one that illuminated the porch.

The headlights of another car came on as he pulled into the parking lot. The other vehicle shot past him; he was about to lean on his horn when he recognized Chris Szekely's Subaru. She turned right and sped down the street.

He suddenly feared for her. He backed out of the parking lot and drove after her.

He followed her to the ramp that led to the interstate. There was little traffic on the highway, only a Greyhound and a pickup truck between him and the Subaru. Occasionally her car disappeared behind a curve and he worried that he might lose her before he caught sight of her once more. Soon the road became straighter and he was able to keep her car in view. She passed one exit, then another.

More vehicles were on the highway now. A truck rumbled past him on the left and then cut in front of him. Marc slowed, cursing under his breath. By the time he was able to pass the truck, he could no longer see Chris's car.

He had lost her. A bridge lay ahead of him, and beyond it the bright specks of light that marked the city of Hannaford. Marc kept driving.

Chris parked her car in a nearly empty lot across from the ramp that led up to the bridge. An old warehouse had stood there when she was still living in Hannaford, but had since been torn down to make way for the parking lot.

She got out of the car and crossed the street. A car passed her as she walked up the right side of the ramp. She should have been on the other side, facing oncoming traffic; she was not easily visible and somebody might hit her from behind. She did not care.

The others were still inside her. She no longer remembered the words she had picked up from all of them at the inn, only the emotions. There was Catherine's despair, pushed to the edges but waiting to drag her back into that dark pit of hopelessness. There was Reine's resentment at the detour her life had taken, resentment so deeply repressed that she was only vaguely aware that it existed. Her sister's bitterness and longing for her own life were at war with her duty to her mother, and then there was the café owner, whose anger at anything that threatened his business simmered just below the surface. The innkeepers were even more protective of their precarious business, although their fears were more buried. And there was Marc Zechman, with his mixed waves of lust and rage at the woman who had abandoned him.

Odd that she could sense their feelings and none of her own. Something had burned out inside her. Matthew Elmendorf had done that to her, attacked the threat to him and to everyone around him, all of those people hanging on to whatever lives they had, who sensed on some level how dependent they were on him, on his business. The people whose deaths he had caused would be only abstractions to them.

She came to a pedestrian walkway and kept going, feeling as though the rest of her was only loosely attached to her legs, then stopped to look out at the river. Bright bands of reflected lights from the bridge rippled across the black surface; upriver, the pylons of the old bridge were visible.

And she remembered.

She was on the old bridge again, surrounded by people. Some of them were singing; others were thinking of the dark waters below them. It would be so easy to climb over the railing, to leap into the water and join the current that was like the thoughts flowing through all of them. More voices rose in song; she reached for the hands of the people standing near her. She stamped her feet in unison with the others, knowing that if they kept it up, the bridge would soon collapse.

"Who's going to control that crowd?" She was picking up those thoughts again, the same thoughts that had threaded through her on that other night. "It'll be the ones whose minds can dominate the others. Man, did we screw up—got to shut down that transponder." She was hearing Matthew Elmendorf's thoughts; she was sure of that now. She could do nothing against him, nothing to make him pay for all the deaths he had brought about, but that no longer mattered. She was on the bridge, amid the crowd, ready to accept what she had escaped before. There would be no more bad dreams.

She threw back her head and laughed, then pulled herself up over the railing. She stood there, swaying slightly, feet braced against the railing, arms out, and glanced back as a car pulled up and screeched to a halt.

"Chris!" Marc Zechman was running around the front of the car toward her. He still wanted her, but it was too late. She turned away, threw her arms out, and fell into the river's embrace. ○

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MALICK PAN

Sara Genge

Much like his early twentieth-century namesake, an odd little boy living in the same desolate future as the author's 2009 tale "Shoes to Run" decides that he, too, may never grow up.

When the nanners wake, so does Malick. He feels rather than sees them, filling the space around him, feeding stuff into his head. It's taken him years to realize that only he can hear their voice DIFFERENT inside his skull. Most of the time they behave, letting him keep his own train of thought. But the nanners always have something to say, always, always, chit-chat. They call it EDUCATION. Some days, he hates them.

He's hungry so he pulls the cord that opens up the rat cages. He hears the patter of tiny claws above his head and the screeches of the first explorers to reach the outside. A few will try to hold back but they're greedy and hungry. Those in front get pushed out by the flood from behind. Poor paws on burning black-stone. The nanners correct him,

"IT'S CALLED CONCRETE."

The nanobots are particular about how he thinks about things. They also hate it when he calls them nanners, so, of course, that's what Malick does.

Through the air-hole comes the scent of burnt fur.

"Buen dinner," Nelly says, and nods for emphasis. She's small but smart. Even though she can't see in the dark, she understands that Malick can.

The nanners zoom around and talk. They tell him about how the children's maze used to be a PLAYGROUND in an AMUSEMENT PARK, whatever that is. When the city locked itself up and let the outskirts fade, the maze was buried in mud and garbage drifting here from the trash-tubes. Big people don't fit inside the maze and Malick is glad: life would be unbearable if the big-hungries shared the children's space.

"Got to be careful, no getting greedy," Malick says. They must give the rats a chance to make babies. Greedy today, hungry tomorrow.

The screeching stops and Malick braves the heat near the air-hole to let his nanners taste the night. The sooner they emerge, the more rats they will nab before the other children leave the maze. But even his nanners can't take the full blast of daylight, and Nelly has no nanners. If he opens the tube too soon, she'll roast.

When the nanners think it's safe, the children scamper out into the glaring dusk, hopping like mice, avoiding the patches of black-stone coated with RUBBER where the rats have stuck and died.

Nelly spits on a rock and giggles at the sizzle. Then, she jumps ahead to spot rats for Malick who can, with nanner-coated fingers, pick them up by the tail and brush his hands down their bodies to get rid of the fuzz. They gobble one, two, four rats each before the sound of rolling pebbles tells them that the big-hungries are digging themselves out. The big-hungries live in deeper, spacier pits, but they always want what can be had near the surface. Malick scrambles to pick up the best rats and hurls them into the children's maze, where the big-hungries don't fit.

They dance around on a full stomach. Now they can play! They find milk cartons with Malick's face on them. But no matter how hard they look, they never find one with Nelly's face.

"Nelly!" come the voices. She spins around midair like a bumblebee.

"Nelly! Come feed your family. Are we clan? Nelly!"

Nelly dashes off towards the whiny voices of the big-hungries of her clan.

"Don't let them get greedy!" Malick shouts. Nelly always gives the Rodriguez clan too much. "Save some rats," he whispers as he skulks away.

"Come, Malick. Hunter! Come join us. Nelly speaks well of you," they shout.

"Si, ven," Nelly says. "Son mi clan."

"Your clan!" Malick shouts. Not his. There's a ripple of laughter around the group.

Down south a fire lights up: the Rochets have raided the tunnels of the Stuarts again and are showing everyone that, today, they have trash to burn.

"Malick, don't be tonto," Nelly tiptoes toward him. "Come on, they're buenos. Come." He allows her to lead him to them by the hand. "Dolores, Pedro, Maria, Nestor." She points them out. "Nestor is my husband," she whispers. "We were born married."

"We'll live together when you're old enough." Nestor throws Nelly up into the air. She squeals and he catches her and puts her down. She's laughing so hard she has to sit. Nestor is old, at least thirteen, about five years too old to fit in the maze and harvest rats with the children.

"Stay with us tonight," Dolores says. "Nelly told us what you can do."

Nelly's mother looms above. Her face is too dark even for Malick to see.

"Does he understand anything we say?" Nestor whispers. "He seems . . . slow."

"He does too understand!" Nelly says.

"Are you sure, pequeña? Es un salvaje."

Nelly's face goes red and her fists curl. From experience, Malick knows she's thinking of a clever retort. But she doesn't shout at Nestor like she would at Malick. She kicks the ground and sobs. Dolores brings her close.

"Shh, Nestor," Dolores says. "Don't tease."

"I mean it. Are we even sure it's a he?"

Nelly cries louder and Malick sends his nanners at Nestor, to teach him. The big-hungries can't see in the dark, but they can hear the buzz and cackle. The nanners nibble at Nestor's toes. Nestor drops to the ground and comes back up with a metal bar.

Malick rolls away. In his panic, he calls his nanners back.

"Calm down!" Dolores says. "Por Dios, Nestor, contrólate." Nelly snickers and stops crying. The big-hungries settle down and Dolores kneels next to Malick.

"Here, toma agua." A full bottle of water. For free. Nestor hunches at the edge of the group, shooting Malick angry looks. Malick takes the water and runs.

Other voices call to him, call him hunter! Invite him to their clans. Children are prized because they can fit in the mazes where all the rats live and Malick is always small, forever special. He ignores them.

He has no clan since the trash-tube spit him out. So the nanners say. They say:

"YOU BELONG TO NO ONE AND YOU CAN ONLY TRUST US."

The trash-tube is the only connection between the Waste and the city and the nanners grow pesky near it, but the rats need food. Sometimes, the nanners are whiny and demanding like big-hungries. But Malick isn't afraid of nanners, at least not so much that he'd rather go hungry.

He goes to wait for the next burp from the big shiny trash-tube.

"CITY, CITY, CITY," the nanners sing. Their need for home is shrill. He sways in time

with their song but resists their wheedling. The plastic canvas spread on the ground around the trash-tube shows Malick his own face. Far away, he hears a high-pitched whine. The nanners scream with anticipation and Malick cocks his head.

"THAT DOPPLER EFFECT MEANS IT'S COMING CLOSER," the nanners explain.

The compressed trash decelerates onto the drop spot. The jaws of the trash-tube open with a hiss and the stale draft from inside stirs the plastic so that Malick's face ripples and disappears.

City nanners puff out. They recognize Malick and attach themselves to his body with the strength of a boy who has found a hatch just before dawn. He becomes darker as grey nanners pile upon grey. They're more insistent than Malick's regular nanners: their programming is new. They're naïve, fresh, they still believe they can convince him to go back to the city. He knows better: he's Malick! Nanners are too tiny to boss him around.

They scream a lot, but as long as he can hear them and do nothing, he's fine.

He's scared of the trash-tubes than of any big-hungry, but Malick's no coward, so he jumps inside the jaws before the trash cube is released and rides out on top.

"SILICON! CRUSHED ROSES! TOOTHPASTE! DIAPERS! FOOD! ORGANIC!" The nanners hum. "CITY! CITY! PARIS! HOME! BELONG! CITY! CITY!"

Malick dances on the cube. The nanners point his mind at the trash-tube and further away, at the blanket of light in the distance.

"PARIS. HOME! HOME! Go! CITY! CITY!" The nanners flood his mind with images that they tell him to find appealing, promise foods he's never heard of, clothes like only big-hungries wear.

He gathers the organic stuff and the toothpaste, which the rats can eat. The nanners better not forget who's in charge.

"You, kid, got rats?"

Malick jumps down from the cube, away from the big-hungry. He knows this one: a loner. Dangerous.

He scampers into the darkness until he can see the big-hungry silhouetted against the blue light from the trash-tube. Malick likes this game: it's called I-can-see-you-but-you-can't-see-me.

"Mean no harm, kid. S'ok. Got food for tonight." The big-hungry points at the dead birds strung across his waist. They smell rotten, delicious, and Malick is jealous.

"Come here. Want some? Trade for rats, no?"

It's too good an offer to pass up.

Malick whistles okay.

"One rat, one bird," he says.

"Two rats, one bird," the man says.

Malick grunts but lets the big-hungry lead the way back to the maze. The nanners long to stay near the trash-tube, they want him to go inside, get eaten up by the tube and by the city, but Malick is tough. He's stronger than them. And the scent of pigeon helps him concentrate. Food he can understand. CITY, he can't.

"She's pretty at night, eh? The city." The man looks up at PARIS. Big-hungries without clans are like that, they talk to fill the spaces in the air. "Used to live there, once. Kicked me out, too. Had no right. How was I to know those offshore assets were illegal? We'd been doing it for years! Just earning a living. Not my fault the money disappeared. They took my nanobots away!" The big-hungry's chin trembles in the blue light. "Where did you get yours? Been a while since I've seen more than a hint of a haze, if you catch my drift." He sways from side to side, like Malick, and Malick believes he too must be talking to nanners. At least, what he says sounds like nanner-talk, full of city words. Nonsense. But he cannot see grey on the man, and that confuses him.

"Candy, swimming, toys," he mutters to keep the man company. As long as they're playing the silly word game. . . . "Summer, party, birthday, ball!" He jumps into the air. "Ball! Ball! Ball!"

"They kick you out too? What'd you do? No, you're too small to have done much harm. The city does not hurt children."

"They do too," Malick whispers. He doesn't know where that comes from but he knows it's true. He feels a scare about to hit and doesn't have time to prepare. Suddenly, it's rage all over. His face burns and his arms fly out. The nanners sense his weakness and start shouting, promising, and threatening, all at once.

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" he hollers. "You too!" He tells the big-hungry. "Go away or I kick and I bite. Go away or my clan gets you. Go away!"

"Calm down kid," the big-hungry says, "Meant nothing by it. Come on, don't be angry. Hey! Are you the kid on the milk cartons? They've been looking for you for years! Children don't get lost in Paris, they're so civilized. They take care of their own—except for you, I guess. You're a mystery. If we both went back, maybe they'd let me . . ." His eyes do what the eyes of stupid people do when they have an idea. Stupid people have so few ideas that their faces show them all. Smart people have a thousand ideas a second, so their faces have practice hiding them.

Malick has a thousand ideas a second. His face is flat.

"Here, have some pigeon," the big-hungry says. He steps toward Malick. Mistake. Malick goes for the face. The big-hungry backs off, stumbles in the dark and falls. He grabs Malick's arms, but the nanners make them slippery. Malick presses his tiny fingers into the big-hungry's eyeballs. The man roars and hits Malick on the chest. Malick flies. The hard landing makes the rage go away and shuts the nanners up.

"Excuse me." Malick blushes and sprints off.

"BAD MANNERS," the nanners chide. "JUST BECAUSE THE BIG-HUNGRY WANTED TO TAKE YOU BACK IS NO REASON TO ALMOST BLIND HIM. IT'S NOT PLAYING FAIR."

Malick is so ashamed.

The nanners renew their attack, howling for home.

"SAFETY, FLOWERS, SCHOOL, FRIENDS." They are so tiresome.

Malick stops running and pants, doubled-up. He hates them! It's all their fault. He stops feeling sorry for the big-hungry and stomps back home.

"Nelly, Nelly, Nelly," he says with each stomp. Those are Malick's words, not the nanners'. Those are words he understands.

Nelly has given the night's catch to her clan. Malick curses outside of the circle of shadows. The big-hungries have their own critters down *there*. For all he cares they can eat them raw.

Dolores leaves the circle and walks slowly toward Malick, keeping her arms spread out away from her body so that he can see them and know she has nothing to hide.

"I've heard talk about you. You used to live further east, didn't you? Is there another food giver over there? Any clans?" Dolores asks.

Malick keeps at a distance, remembering how it felt when the big-hungry hit him on the chest. If he had a clan the loner would already be dead. He could never again talk to Malick about the city, never again make him feel bad. Never help the nanners against him.

"There's another trash-tube," Malick says.

"Oh, are those his made-up words, Nelly?" Nestor says.

"Not made up," Nelly says and winks at Malick in the dark. Nestor can't see that.

"Don't mind them, answer Dolores's question, kid. How many clans? How many men in each?" That's Pedro, Dolores's husband.

Malick wonders whether to answer. If the clan goes east, they'll take Nelly, at least for one night. If the raid is successful they'll sleep in their enemies' pits and make their way back the next night with food. But if they lose . . .

Pedro dangles a hard brown stick in front of Malick. Taken from the trash. But Malick knows better than to risk losing Nelly over a candy bar.

Then he has an idea. "If I tell you, I go with you. I become Rodriguez!"

The big-hungries laugh.

"Look at him, what a bargainer."

"Wants to be strong-clannned!"

"Rodriguez! Rodriguez! Rodriguez!"

"He's a good hunter. I say let him stay."

Pedro nods. "If you want to hunt and fight, you can come."

Malick grabs the candy bar (let them think he cares) and holds up two fingers, then four, then six. Two clans, four fighters in one, six in the other.

"Good boy!" A hand slams into his back and guides him to the huddle of clan. There are eight Rodriguez men and six women. They mutter and make plans. Malick drifts off, but keeps an ear on the conversation. They believe they can take the two eastern clans, no problem. Malick smiles.

Maybe the Rodriguez will win and get good trash and Malick will be one of them. That would be good. But maybe they'll lose and Nelly will stay with Malick. He knows cracks they could hide in during the day. He could keep her safe one day, or many. And maybe Nestor could die. That would be better.

"You are married," Malick says.

Nelly scuttles to him in the dark as the maze warms up. "Don't be greedy." Malick feels her push through his nanner cloud until she touches his skin-under-the-skin. She's still small. She won't become a big-hungry just yet, won't be Nestor's just yet; so he shares with her, bringing nanners up from his mouth and body in fistfuls, spreading them on her skin to keep her cool.

Tell nanners to stick and they'll stick, 'least for a while.

She lies down behind him and wraps her arms around his neck. As his brain shuts off, the nanners hum slower. They sound stronger in his dreams.

"Keep me small," he asks. Small enough to fit inside the maze. He doesn't want to grow up ever.

"AS WE'VE BEEN DOING FOR YEARS?"

"I'm in charge. I'm Malick! You do as I say."

"YOUR BRAIN IS TOO SMALL. TOO MANY MEMORIES, SO MUCH FORGOTTEN . . ."

"Go away." Malick says. He's in charge and forgetting is nice. The Waste is the same, day after day, there's nothing to remember here except Nelly, and he can't forget her if he sees her every day, right? And the city was the same, day after day, except the day the captain came. It would be good to forget that day: the smell of him, the smell of the city suddenly full of men who smelled like the captain.

"YOU COULD RETURN. GO TO THE POLICE: THEY'D KEEP YOU SAFE."

"No! Keep me small." The captain told him he'd kill him if he went to the police. But the solution is simple: he won't go back to the city. Ever.

The reluctant nanners scuttle to do his bidding.

"MALICK PAN, MALICK PAN, ALWAYS YOUNG," they tease.

Nelly mutters in her sleep and Malick wakes. "And Nelly too, keep her small for me," he whispers.

Tell nanners to stick . . .

Nelly turns in her sleep. She hasn't grown any in the past year but nobody's complaining: she's a good hunter for her clan.

* * *

The clan walks quietly, saving the war cries for later, but Malick tastes their excitement, hears the pause of each skipped heartbeat, the cackle of tension on matted hair. In his head, the Rodriguez clan hums like its own group of nanners—and his nanners are almost silent by comparison.

They move slowly by starlight, lifting feet to avoid breaking toes.

Hum, hum, hum, hear the loud silence of the Rodriguez clan!

Malick can't tell who made the song, him or the nanners, but he loves it and loves this war game.

They walk ten miles before the light of the other trash-tube makes them drop to the ground. The pebbles are smaller here and Malick sniffs the rubble and burnt kikuyu grass for scents of his old home. The trash-tube grinds open and a gust of wind blows a handful of chits their way. They settle around Malick, slight and fluorescent, reflecting the tube light in shades of purple and grey.

"THEY USED TO BE MONEY," the nanners tell him, "NOW THEY'RE WORTH NOTHING," and they go on and on about ECONOMIC TRENDS and POLITICAL POWER SHIFTS. Malick isn't listening.

Further ahead, big-hungries move against the light. They're skinny and Malick fears they'll be no match for the Rodriguez. He doesn't want them to win, but he wants them to fight back. That way maybe something can happen to Nestor.

The clan creeps in and watches the enemy converging around the trash-tubes.

Pedro gives the signal, a rat-screech, and the biggest fighters go down with stones, from a distance. Then the war cries start. Everyone who can shout shouts, and everything that can screech screeches, even the rats in and out of their tunnels, even the women, clawing, even the leaves rubbing against Malick's nanners as they zip by.

Malick grabs Nelly and dives for one of his old hiding spots. They pant in the darkness, listening to the fight above. There are sounds of pain, some they recognize. Nelly whimpers and Malick holds her, as much for comfort as to keep her from darting out to join the battle.

His nanners try to keep him informed but they're covering too much ground. A Smith is down, then a Garcia. A Rodriguez is wounded, and a woman, clan unknown, is taken and dragged to a tunnel below.

Sudden silence, and Malick can almost sense all the thinking in the air. The clans have pulled back. Have the Rodriguez won, lost, or are they just regrouping? Malick's nanners fly far, so many gaps in his net . . .

"Here you are." The door is removed and Nestor's arm enters the hidey-hole. Malick backs off but the arm grabs his ankle.

"Nelly?" Nestor asks.

"I'm here," Nelly says from behind Malick.

"¿Estás bien?"

"Sí."

"¿Cómo te está tratando ese idiota?"

"He's treating me good, and idiota your mother!" Nelly whispers.

Nestor laughs and his voice breaks. He's silent for a few seconds. He sounds embarrassed.

"Come out, Nelly, come fight at your husband's side."

"Mother said not to be alone with you for another two years."

"Dolores is busy now."

Behind Malick, Nelly shrinks back into the plastic tube.

"Come out, Nelly," Nestor sing-songs. "I'll tell you that story about the big-hungry

who wanted to eat me. I'll tell you about the things I found in the food-giver the other day. I'll give you the conch."

"The one with the red marking?"

"Yes, Nelly, the one with the red spiral across it. I have more pretty things, do you want them?" Nestor's other hand gropes the inside of the maze, finding Malick's other foot, his knees, his thighs.

Nelly nudges Malick to get outside.

"No!" Malick kicks Nestor's arms. Nestor grunts low in his throat and rams his head through the opening, getting most of his shoulders inside. Malick keeps kicking but he can't turn around to use his fingers on Nestor's eyes.

"Oh, that's you. I knew you were a savage," Nestor says. He grabs Malick's ankles until they hurt and holds him down against the plastic. "Now, be a good . . . thing . . . and let my wife come out."

"I'm not a thing," Malick says.

"Well, you sure aren't a boy. You were small when I was smaller than Nelly. You never grew up. Tell me, what are you doing to my wife in the kid-mazes in the dark? You may fool the others, but you don't fool me."

"I'm a kid."

"Then I can hurt you like I can hurt a little boy."

He twists the ankle and Malick screams.

"I'm a boy! I decided not to grow up." Malick says. Nestor's hands on his legs feel familiar. He lies there, sweating, heart beating out of his small chest, thinking. There are flashes of memories that he can almost grasp, an escape from a bad place.

And then he knows. It's Nestor he's been running from all along. Maybe not this Nestor, but one of the other Nestors of the world. There's not just one captain but a whole slew of them, with dozens of lost children who need a leader. . . . But that's a game. He must think of real stuff to survive.

"You had no right," Nestor mutters. "They all think you're such a great hunter. . . . I was a great hunter in my time, but I grew up. As everyone should. Now I'll make babies and they'll hunt rats. You had no right to stay small."

"You want to make Nelly grow up too soon. I just made me stay small. I didn't hurt nobody."

"Nelly, come out to me, I won't hurt you," Nestor whispers.

Nelly turns around in the tunnel until she's head-to-head with Malick. She trembles all over and Malick senses that she's on the verge of knowing, like Malick was, just at the edge of understanding that what the captain wanted was wrong. Malick did understand, but too late.

Malick remembers diving into the trash-tubes after the captain got him, too ashamed to tell anyone, too ashamed to go back home.

But that's a memory, one of those city things that the nanners throw at him. It won't help him now.

"Don't go, Nelly," he whispers.

Malick's ankle cracks. He screams.

"Stop! Now! Stop!" Nelly yells. She's as loud and as fearsome as a bumblebee. Sometimes, it sucks to be small.

"Come out, Nelly. You need to grow up."

That's what the captain said. *Now you're all grown up.*

Kill him, Malick thinks to his nanners. *Crawl into his mouth and stop him breathing, tickle his lungs and make them bleed.* The nanners gather on Malick's stomach. They form a ball and start rolling over Malick's body, gathering more and more of themselves into something bigger and smarter.

Without them on his skin, Malick feels the full bite of night and shivers like he's never done before.

"NOT BIG ENOUGH, NOT BIG ENOUGH," the nanners hum.

Around and around they spin.

"STILL NOT BIG, A LITTLE MORE, A LITTLE MORE."

What's wrong? What are you doing? Malick thinks at them.

"WE CAN SMOOTHER HIM, BUT IF WE CREEP INTO HIS NOSTRILS LITTLE BY LITTLE, HE'LL JUST COUGH US UP IN BITS AT A TIME. HE'LL BE ANGRY AND HE WON'T BE DEAD. WE NEED TO PRY HIS JAWS OPEN, GO IN TOGETHER. BUT HE'S A MAN, WE NEED TO BE SO STRONG. WE NEED TO BE BIG."

Round and round. Rolling, rolling. Malick's skin-without-nanner-skin presses into Nelly behind him. She hugs him tight.

Outside, people start screaming. Malick has no nanners to spare and he hears it all with his own ears only. Without the nanners, he feels small and weak.

"BIGGER, BIGGER."

The last nanners crawl out of his ears and nostrils and join the others.

"NOT BIG ENOUGH. WE ARE NOT BIG ENOUGH." The nanners cry in defeat.

"Go for the eyes," Malick says.

"What are you talking about, you stupid . . ." Nestor says.

The ball lifts off and slams into Nestor's face. The ball glows. Nestor's scream is a terrible thing. The scream cuts through the sound of fighting and does things to Malick's insides. Next, Nestor gurgles as the nanners use the chance to creep into his mouth. His arms thrash and Malick cries out from the pain in his legs.

Nestor is still.

The children gather their breath for a second and then Nelly retreats to give Malick space to turn around. The fighting is still going strong. By touch, Malick finds Nestor's body and dislodges it from the opening of the hidey-hole.

When they step outside, Nestor's hollowed sockets glare up at them. Malick shivers and places two chits to cover the holes. He's glad it's a moonless night.

Malick sits away from the clan, naked and lame. Without the nanners to assist him, he can hardly see in the dark. The stars are bright, but there is no moon and the little light coming from the trash-tube and the city in the distance only lets him guess at the shapes around him.

Nelly has gone running to Dolores but he knows she won't tattle. She'll say Nestor was killed by a stray Garcia. The clan will know he's disappeared but they need not know anything else.

Something hums to his right. It's a sound he almost recognizes. He cocks his head. Without the nanners everything in him is slow and stupid.

The nanner ball glows gray and drifts in front of Malick.

"You're back," he whispers. He doesn't think they can hear his thoughts any more.

"Yes." It comes as sound, actual sound that Malick hears with his real ears. The ball starts spinning. Malick laughs and tries to get up to play but the pain stops him.

"Come back," he says. He needs his nanner-skin more than he needs a new friend. The ball hums and Malick wonders whether it's making up its mind.

"We are no longer just nanners, Malick. We're bigger now. We've grown up. We were made to help you. We were sent out of the city to find you and bring you back. Nobody understood why you left: Paris treats its infants well."

"But we found you were the only one out here who could control us. We could not convince you to come back. How we ached! How we hurt! Have you no pity for our programming? We have failed but now it doesn't matter. We no longer do your bidding."

"What are you?"

"You can call us Tinkerbell. It's appropriate." The nanners chortle and zip off into the night leaving Malick alone.

Nelly comes to him again that night and Malick finds one of his old hidey-holes by touch. He doesn't know how Nelly manages without nanner-sight. There are stones everywhere, everywhere cracks. Dolores has splinted his ankle, but there was that look in her eyes, like she didn't think he'd survive the injury.

"You can come back with us," Nelly whispers.

"They don't want me."

"No, but they promised to take you, and the other clans don't know about your nanners. They still think you're strong! 'Sides, I'm a good hunter too, I can keep the clan fat on rats until your leg heals and you learn how to walk in the dark. A promise is a promise."

"Maybe." It comes out flat. "Or maybe I could go into the trash-tubes like the nanners said. I was running from the captain but it turns out there are captains everywhere, not just in the city. Might as well go back if the Waste isn't safe."

"The tubes eat people." Nelly speaks with conviction.

Malick grunts acknowledgement. He's sure she's right but at this point he'd rather be eaten than slowly fade in the dark.

"Stay with me," Nelly whispers. That clinches it for him.

That night, he dreams of lost children. Maybe he can find them. Maybe he can make a city of hurt children who will never have to fear another captain.

In his dream, he's Malick Pan and he can do whatever he wants. In his dream, he feeds Nestor to the rats. But when he wakes up he's just Malick. Half-blind and lame. And there's only Nelly beside him.

A long time later, Nelly sits next to him. He can't remember how many nights it's been.

Everything is always a long time in the dark.

"Dolores has married me again," she whispers.

Malick bunches up his fists in anger.

"Can't she learn?" All those big-hungries, hungry for children, hungry to make children grow up too fast. Can't they wait? The kids will all be big-hungries in the end, so why the hurry? And Dolores was supposed to be one of the good ones.

"She was going to wait, but that Stuart man brought his potato alcohol . . ."

"And she sold you again . . ."

"He's so old, and his breath smells. But maybe I won't have to kiss him. At least he says he'll wait until I grow up."

"Like Nestor did."

Nelly starts sobbing.

Malick puts his arms around her. "We'll see who grows up. We'll see."

And so it's time to talk to Tinkerbell again. Malick takes a deep breath. She'll see who's boss.

"So, you've come to us again." Tinkerbell tries to sound hurt, but Malick can tell she's preening from the attention.

"I need your help, Nelly needs your help."

"Nelly, Nelly, Nelly, always Nelly. It's been Nelly from the beginning. What about me? You never thought about me the way you thought about Nelly," Tinkerbell says.

Malick doesn't know what to say. Nelly is people. Tinkerbell . . . well, Tinkerbell isn't.

"You could keep her small," Malick suggests.

"Yes, but why would I want to do that?"

Malick huffs and sits down on his big swollen foot. He picks up pebbles and chuck them at Tinkerbell. She spins around but some of them get her and she makes hurt-noises.

"See?" Malick says, "That's what it feels like. Pain. That's what you get when you're smart enough to feel. Pain. Pain. Pain."

"Stop!"

Malick looks up. He can hardly see Tinkerbell in the dark but he knows she can see him. She might react to the poor sad little boy eyes, even if she's only a grey nanner ball.

"Okay, okay, okay! I'll make her small. I'll crawl into her brain and keep her small. Whatever. Even though she's stupid. But Malick, all I ever wanted was to bring you back to the city. I was made for that. All you poor lost children . . ."

"Are there more of us?" He *imagined* there were, but now he *knows!* It's the only good thing that's happened to him since Nestor.

Tinkerbell shrugs her amorphous grey shoulders. "Some, who cares? I'm here for

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you. But, Malick, you have to go back to the city. If you want Nelly to stay small, to be a hunter forever, I have to see you go back."

"Deal. You keep her small and safe from all the captains and I'll go back inside the trash-tube," Malick says. A promise is a promise but he's been careful with the wording: he's sure he has a lot of wriggle room in that one.

The next day, he slips an orange conch into Nelly's hand and limps toward the blue trash-tube light.

"Wait!" she shouts.

He doesn't stop. Tinkerbell is already drifting into Nelly's ears, keeping her side of the bargain. Nelly will stay small forever; she won't need Malick. And she has Dolores, even though Dolores is stupid sometimes. She has clan. Malick is only a lame blind boy.

And anything is better than the dark.

The metal jaws open and out pops the trash cube. Malick clammers over it to get inside the mouth before the opening closes. There's a grey haze in there and he knows these are thousands of teeny-tiny beings exchanging data bytes. These are smaller than his old nanners: even before they became Tinkerbell, they'd had to grow to be smart and keep up with Malick. He wants to listen to their conversation like he used to. He sighs like he's seen Nelly do, imitating her mother. Some things can't be, but at least in here there is light.

He crawls in without thinking too much. If he thinks about it his body won't obey.

The jaws close and the blue light dims. He hears a hiss and the haze around him clears. It's as if the air and the nanners were going somewhere else. He feels faint and realizes he's panting.

Air! He grasps at his throat, which won't obey.

Just like those silly nanners. Nobody obeys him any more.

A grey haze surrounds him and creeps into his ears.

"HELLO."

"New nanners!"

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN, NEW? WE'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR YOU FOR AGES, MALICK. BE A GOOD BOY AND COME BACK HOME."

They obviously haven't talked with Tinkerbell.

"I'm dying," he says.

"OH, THAT'S BAD, SORRY."

They sound newborn, confused. He doubts they can help him.

Out of the corner of his eye he sees a rat-tail disappearing into a—is that a hatch?

He crawls toward it—rats always know a way out—and digs his fingers into the cracks. The safeties go off and the hatch opens. He crawls into a smaller tunnel that's full of air, and light.

"SERVICE TUBES," the nanners humm. "IF YOU HAD TOLD US THAT YOU WANTED AIR . . ."

Malick shrugs them off. New nanners are always kind of stupid.

He hears the sound of the next trash burp.

"IT TAKES LESS ENERGY TO ACCELERATE IT IN A SEMI-VACUUM."

"Yeah, yeah," he mutters. That's nanners for you, always talking data. But at least the new nanners converge on top of his ankle and he feels the throbbing stop.

Malick can see his own hands in the blue emergency light. The pins in his lungs are fading. He smiles. For now he's alive and he is going toward the city. There's nowhere else to go and maybe he can find the lost children along the way. About growing up—he'll have to see about that. He is Malick! He has a thousand ideas a second. These nanners are new, and stupid, not like Tinkerbell. He's sure he can convince them to keep him small. O

ALten KAMERADEN

Barry B. Longyear

Known best (unfortunately, he feels) for the motion picture *Enemy Mine*, Barry Longyear wrote "Alten Kameraden" after reading a description of a historically significant crime scene and realizing that what was reputed to have taken place there couldn't have happened the way the experts said it did. Inspired by yet another misunderstood historical crime scene, Barry is currently at work on a Civil War vampire novel.

Marcoing Region, France
24 September 1918

The sky was just beginning to lighten as Kurt Wolff examined the British works, his gaze quickly scanning long stretches of trench then quickly returning to pick out individual features that had become as familiar to him as old friends. He studied his old friends, looking to see if they had changed: The configuration of the endless wire barricades, the four empty tins tossed over the top by some well-fed Tommy, the shattered trees, the gaping craters, the shapes of the trench lines—*there*. There was a change: A slight rise in the chewed-up ground slightly left of his center that hadn't been there the day before. In the near dark it looked like earth thrown up by the creation of a nearby crater, but the crater had been there the evening before and the rise in the dirt next to it had not.

The Tommy sniper had killed dozens and knew how to hide. Once he fired, revealing his position, the Tommy would move. Kurt had to smile and give a slight nod in admiration. Everyone would be looking to the works, the sandbagged trench edges, for snipers. It would be insane to take a position forward of his own trench. No one, however, would think to look there. Kurt studied the position as he examined what ifs. The Tommy couldn't fire, drill his prey, then jump up and flee to the safety of his own trench. If it took him more than a second he'd be ripped apart by a dozen German slugs.

Down into the dirt like a rabbit, that's how he'd go. The British sniper must have tunneled through the trench wall to his present position, broken through the surface in the dark, spread his dirt-stained blanket overhead, taken his position, and waited—if he was there at all. Kurt didn't wish to give away his own position, otherwise right now he could pop a round into that rise in the earth. If no one was there, however, it would be a wasted shot and Kurt would have to find a new position himself.

There was a deeper shadow at the edge of the camouflage closest to the German lines. If Tommy was looking at the German trench, that would be where the shot

would come from. Kurt glanced back at the slight rise to the rear of his own position. Poorly placed trench. Runners going to and from the rear had to cross that rise, which was why they called it the shooting gallery. A trench was being dug rearward, but it was not yet completed. When they'd come over the rise, the runners would dip and dodge until they managed to drop into the trench. There were exceptions: late at night and very early in the morning. Not so much running and dodging then. That's what the Tommy sniper was waiting for, some careless fellow going to or coming from regiment, taking it easy before full light.

Again Kurt studied the rise in the soil. The Tommy would be standing in his rabbit hole, nothing but his head and shoulders exposed beneath the blanket. If the muzzle of his rifle was near the edge of the camouflage, his head would be just there. Tommy would be shooting uphill, leaving less exposed. The German eased his right forefinger from the trigger guard to the trigger, placed the crosshairs on the rise where the Tommy's head should be, and waited.

A murmur of voices from far behind him. A little chuckling, and that guttural "Haw!" the Austrian lance corporal from regimental headquarters always made when he laughed. Kurt and he had both received the Iron Cross First Class at the same ceremony. Another voice—

—The shadow at the near edge of the camouflage changed ever so slowly as the Tommy adjusted his aim. Kurt fired first, the center of the dirt-stained blanket erupting as the Tommy jerked back, his own weapon firing harmlessly wide of its target. Kurt turned from his position, bringing his rifle with him, as a baffling feeling of dread filled him. For a slice of existence it was as though all the world's dead mounted the edges of their graves at the same time and beckoned him. He couldn't catch his breath. When he could at last breathe, Kurt rubbed his eyes. Too long on the front, too many kills, and too little sleep; that was what it was, he told himself.

"Wolff, you look white as a sheet," said Sergeant Zimmerer, both of them on the trench's step to stay out of the mud and squatting to stay out of the lead rain.

Lowering his hand, Kurt ignored the sergeant and looked back toward the rise. He could see the lance corporal crouching beside a stump, his eyes wide. The runner gave a quick nod and wave in thanks to Kurt, then quickly sprang to his feet and dived for the trench.

Kurt looked at Sergeant Zimmerer, a heavy-set fellow with a red face and graying handlebar moustache. "I need some rest, sergeant. My eyes play tricks on me."

"They were good enough to make that shot, Wolff. Incredible marksmanship. Turn in for a couple of hours. You earned it. Lance corporal Hitler owes you his life."

Kurt entered the shelter dug into the ground from the side of the trench, found his bedroll, and stretched out on it. It had been a long night, but he couldn't sleep. Behind his eyes the dead were still beckoning.

Berlin

30 April 1945

Herr Wolff? Kurt Wolff? Are you down there, Herr Wolff?"

The soldier was shouting from the head of the stairs, his bull's voice barely audible above the din of the Russian shelling. His image was momentarily framed by the flash of an airburst against the night sky, his words chopped short by the explosion. The concussion shook the building's foundations, raised the dust on everything in the basement, and caused the soldier instinctively to leap through the entrance where he fell on the wooden landing shouting, "My god, Ivan! Enough! Go have a smoke!"

Kurt Wolff, the smoke of the burning city in his scarred lungs, cringed and slid deeper between the old barrels and rubble in the basement. He put his canvas bag of

tools and salvaged electrical parts on his lap, reached silently into the bag, and took out the trench knife he had taken from the body of a dead Frenchie on the Somme back in '15. Another explosion, then three more in quick succession—much closer. It was like the Great War had never ended—except for the Soviet Katyusha rockets. They screamed through the night like regiments of deranged ghostmakers. They were new. Very new and very close.

The soldier got up from the landing and rushed down the creaking stairs, his solid weight threatening to do to the stairs what the shelling had not. Kurt gripped the knife more tightly.

SS, perhaps, thought Kurt, or some self-appointed son of Siegfried rich with rifles searching for little boys, old men, and cripples to throw beneath the wheels of the Soviet juggernaut.

The man had tracked him here in the middle of the night during the hell of a constant artillery barrage. He looked as though he wouldn't leave until he'd checked every corner. Persistent. Very thorough. Patient. The fellow was more policeman than soldier.

Kurt started as the beam of a flashlight struck his face, then extinguished almost as quickly as it came on, leaving Kurt momentarily blinded. "Herr Wolff? Is that you?"

"Yes."

"My god!" The man crossed the floor, his heavy boots loud against the concrete. He appeared to be alone. Kurt renewed his grip on the trench knife. "I've been trying to find you since before midnight. You should see what's going on up there. How many times can Ivan turn over the damned rubble? It'll take a steam shovel to clean out my pants. Hurry, Herr Wolff. It will be light soon and the Russian snipers are a hungry lot. Why didn't you answer me?"

"One can never tell who is calling one's name on the streets these days," answered Kurt warily.

"Oh." He cocked his head toward the entrance. "You mean that business hanging from the lampposts. Street corner gauleiters with too much rope to sell. Forgive me, Herr Wolff. I'm Sergeant Balter. I'm with the RSD."

The *Reichssicherheitsdienst*; the Führer's personal bodyguard. After a lightheaded moment of reflection, Kurt's curiosity got the better of his fear. "What do you want of me?"

"Gothard Hentschel, Herr Wolff. Do you know him?"

"The engineer at the Chancellery," answered Kurt. "He has had me find parts for him."

"He needs you, Herr Wolff. He has a generator with whooping cough, a ventilation system that doesn't believe in air, and he desperately needs some assistance. There's a party going on and the smell is spoiling it."

"Party?" Kurt repeated.

"What?" Balter said, a comic tone in his voice, "You haven't gotten your invitation? Never mind. Mine was misplaced, as well. The Führer has just gotten married, you see. Champagne and chocolate cake for everyone."

"Married."

"To the lovely Miss Eva Braun. She replaces the Führer's dog Blondi he had poisoned yesterday. She's much prettier than Blondi, but she can't fetch worth a damn—" Another airburst illuminated the cellar as a blanket of artillery shells landed north toward Behrenstrasse, shaking dust from the beams and planks above. The sergeant instinctively dropped into a squat and hunched his shoulders. Once the pieces of the city settled, he glanced up. "Come," said Balter. "Between loads. We must hurry, unless you prefer borscht to wiener schnitzel. The Russian lines are just a few hundred meters from here."

"How can you tell?"

"The telephone operators in the bunker have been calling numbers street by street. Every so often someone answers "Da?"

"Where are you taking me, sergeant?"

"Hentschel maintains the lights, water, and air for the Führer's headquarters in the bunkers beneath the old Chancellery." His head cocked to one side. "Hentschel told me you were in the 16th Bavarian Reserve in the first war," the sergeant said.

"I was."

"Astonishing. You know, that's the Führer's old regiment."

"Yes. I knew him then."

"Then it will be like old times for you. Old comrades swapping stories in the trenches over a tin of mystery meat." He held out a hand.

"Old comrades," Kurt repeated to himself. He placed the trench knife in his bag and took the sergeant's hand. Balter pulled him to his feet. The man was built like a tank. Kurt held his bag in his left hand and followed the sergeant toward the stairs. "So, how is my old comrade doing?" he asked the sergeant.

"You mean Adolph Hitler?"

"Yes. I hear since I knew him he's been promoted," Kurt said, his comment swallowed by another explosion. Just as well, thought Kurt. People react badly to humor nowadays. Some jokes are even terminal—especially ones about Hitler. Still, when Kurt caught a glimpse of Sergeant Balter's face, he was chuckling.

The air on the street was thick with brick dust and that singular reek of a shelled city composed of a mix of fuels: petroleum, rubber, wood, explosives, and human bodies. The day before there had been a body hanging from the lamppost on the corner of Jaegerstrasse and Mauer: a white-haired old woman in a dowdy blue dress. Kurt hadn't known her. She was just one of the countless dead in Berlin. As Kurt followed Balter through the rubble, he could make out in the light of the false dawn that both the old woman and the lamppost from which she had been hanging were gone. In their place was a crater still smoking from the shell that dug it.

The young man hanging from the watchmaker's sign on Mauer was still there, however, his left shoe mysteriously missing. The cardboard hanging from his neck by a length of twine proclaimed his sin: "Too cowardly to fight for the fatherland." This one Kurt had known: the Reinard boy. His father had died in France in the first war, his brother on the Eastern Front in this war, his mother and sister killed in the same bombing. At twenty-two Emil Reinard hadn't quite mastered reading or speaking. He had very bad eyes and was a bit slow. He had a singing voice, however, that could make a stone weep.

Kurt averted his gaze as he and the sergeant crossed the street at a crouched run. In moments they were in a maze of crumbling walls and smoking rubble, Kurt wheezing as his lungs fought for oxygen. As the dawn light touched the eastern sky, lightening the ubiquitous smoke, they came to the edge of Wilhelm Platz facing the south wing of the old Reich Chancellery. The floors immediately above the massive double doors were missing from a direct hit. Somehow the delicate second floor balcony had survived. The entrance doors were blocked with rubble.

Balter cursed and said, "Over there." He pointed to the far right of the Chancellery beyond the D-shaped drive with its primordial echoes of horse drawn carriages, liveried servants, marching bands, and sleek black limousines. "Ahead," said Balter, "between the Chancellery and the Foreign Ministry. Unless Ivan rearranged the rubble since I left, there's a path." He looked at Kurt, who was gasping, trying to catch his breath. "You're not *that* old, Herr Wolff."

"Gas," said Kurt. "Near Wervicq . . . Great War."

Balter glanced again at the street, frowned, and held out his hand. "Forgive me. Let me carry your bag."

Gratefully, Kurt handed it over. While he caught his breath, he studied his guide. Sergeant Balter's thick features and solid build were misleading. He had intelligent brown eyes and an unobtrusive wariness that took in everything. Balter waited until Kurt gave him the nod, then the pair crossed Wilhelmstrasse at an angle, rounded the corner of the Chancellery's north wing, and entered the narrow alley just as a fresh flight of artillery shells rattled overhead. The alley was piled with rubble, but there was a cleared path winding its way between the mounds of fractured stone and brick.

Kurt rested again, steadying himself against an upended slab of concrete. By the time Balter returned looking for him, Kurt had caught his breath. He nodded and they continued to pick their way through the path until it widened to the left. Parking places, loading docks—it was impossible to tell from the mountain of rubble that covered it. The sergeant led them past that into a narrow alleyway between the still standing walls of the two buildings. It jogged abruptly to the right and a few meters later to the left widening out into a garden, a few delicate flowers poking through the rubble and the splinters of shattered trees.

"In here, Herr Wolff!" called the sergeant, pointing toward a door in the Chancellery building.

"No guards?" asked Kurt.

Balter grinned. "I believe you will find the guards at the bottom of the stairs keeping out of the rain." The rattle of another flight of shells passing overhead urged Balter to push Kurt toward the door. "And it doesn't look like the weather is going to improve any time soon."

They descended a long straight concrete staircase, its arched ceiling, steps, and platforms illuminated only from the middle and bottom. The bulbs in the fixtures at the top of the stairs had been shattered. The lower they went, the more it seemed to Kurt that the weight of the punished city bore down upon them. At the bottom of the stairs was an odor that easily overpowered the stench of the burning buildings and bodies coming from the surface. It was a mix of diesel fuel, sweat, unwashed clothing, raw concrete, mildew, and sewage. There was another smell, as well: Kurt frowned and glanced at the sergeant. "Chocolate?"

"As advertised," said a smirking Balter.

"What is that sewer smell?"

"Invigorating, isn't it? The bunkers are at a lower level than Berlin's sewers. There would appear to be some seepage." He smiled wryly. "A slight design flaw, perhaps, but be of good cheer. The ventilation system is supposed to be working at this end."

A few steps from the bottom of the stairs were two soldiers of the RSD. They were older men in their middle thirties and forties. After a word from Balter, the pair at the bottom of the stairs passed them through into the end of a long concrete corridor barely two meters wide. At the far end of the hall was a doorway leading to another exit, probably within the New Chancellery building. A third doorway was on the right halfway down the passage. Next to that door against the wall was a paper-littered wooden table behind which was a seated RSD lieutenant. Two RSD guards armed with Schmeissers stood opposite the door leaning back against the wall. The lieutenant was a slender balding fellow in his fifties wearing rimless glasses. He looked a bit haggard and seemed anxious to be someplace else. Looking up first at Kurt, he shifted his gray-eyed gaze to Balter.

"What have you got for me, Oh Bringer of Victory?"

Balter glanced at Kurt. "My first name is Odin," he explained sheepishly. Turning

to the lieutenant, he said, "This is Herr Wolff." Hentschel asked for him to help fix the ventilators."

The lieutenant's face blossomed into smiles as he faced Kurt. "Herr Wolff, if you can accomplish that I can promise you the Iron Cross First Class with chocolate bar." He nodded and held out his hand. "Papers, please."

Kurt took the old leather wallet from his coat's inside breast pocket, removed his papers from it, and handed them to the lieutenant. As he did so the remainder of his documents fell from his wallet to the floor. Stooping, he picked them up and replaced them in the wallet, cursing himself for his nervousness. When he stood and looked again at the lieutenant the man was frowning at him. The lieutenant held out his hand a second time. "All of your documents. Let me see your wallet."

The lieutenant merely glanced at one document, then abruptly came to attention, his heels clicking together. If an officer comes to attention, enlisted racial memory causes sergeants on down to respond accordingly. Not only Balter and the two guards but Kurt, too, all snapped to attention. The lieutenant grinned and held out his hands. "Please, Herr Wolff, I only meant to show respect. Please. No need to stand at attention. Please." The officer looked at Balter and the two guards. "Brothers, may I introduce to you Inspector Wolff, the fellow who helped the citizens of Hanover to improve their diets." He laughed at the confused expressions he received. "This is the man responsible for the arrest of Fritz Haarmann."

"The butcher of Hanover," whispered one of the guards.

Sgt. Balter looked Kurt square in the face. "Your father is Josef Wolff? Inspector in Munich until he retired?"

"Yes." Kurt faced the lieutenant. "You are quite gracious, sir. I am no longer in the police."

"Former detective Ernst Senger, Herr Wolff. I knew your father from Munich." He gestured to the two guards and Sgt. Balter. "Schmidtke, Jansen, Balter—we're all Bavarian Police—just about the entire RSD is."

Kurt grinned. "I thought you boys seemed familiar."

"All the flat feet," joked the guard named Schmidtke. He was tall and rawboned, black hair and blue eyes.

"Your father's name goes a long way with us," said Lt. Senger. His face grew somber. "Is your father well?"

"As far as I know, thank you, Lieutenant. He and my mother went abroad in '31. And to be quite honest, I didn't arrest Fritz Haarmann."

"No," said the squat lantern-jawed guard who had been identified as Jansen. "You and the *Kriminalpolizei* from Berlin came down and simply pointed out that Haarmann was a Hanover police informant, which is why the Saxony cops refused to identify him. You broke the case, sir."

"Terrible pork shortage in Hanover's black market ever since, though," quipped Schmidtke.

After a pained glance at Schmidtke, Lt. Senger gathered up Kurt's documents to replace them in the wallet. As he came to a small brown booklet, he paused. "Your army paybook from when you were in the Great War."

"Hentschel told me Herr Wolff was in the Führer's old regiment, the 16th Bavarian," said Balter.

The lieutenant nodded and glanced up at Kurt. "The Iron Cross First Class."

"The paybook helps ease my way past the street courts up there," Kurt said, glancing in the general direction of the surface.

"The mad dogs are running things, Herr Wolff. Only for the present," said the lieutenant in a lower tone. "We'll have law and order to protect all of us again someday," he remarked as he glanced around nervously and handed Kurt his wallet. He faced

Balter. "Take Herr Wolff to the engineer." He glanced at Kurt, "Good luck, sir—with the ventilation system, as well as other things." He held out his hand and Kurt shook it.

Past the thick gas door, signs and smells to left and right indicated shower rooms and water closets. Straight ahead through another door Kurt saw a long hallway, naked bulbs down the center illuminating a seemingly permanent haze hanging in the air. It wasn't cigarette smoke. Adolph Hitler wouldn't tolerate that. It was more a mixture of dust, humidity, and air fouled with diesel fumes. The sound of a massive detonation came from above, shaking the walls, adding to the dust. The lights dimmed momentarily, but the men and women in the hall space seemed hardly to notice.

There was a large table in the center of the hall. On it were trays of food, several open and unopened bottles of champagne, and—as advertised—chocolate cake. Two of them, both half eaten. Farther down the hall, through a dividing partition, there was a man and a woman dancing to a slow tune, the scratchy lyrics in English. The man was in a Luftwaffe uniform, the woman in a black skirt and white blouse. Two beautiful blond-haired children—both girls hardly school age—were looking through stacks of phonograph records next to a makeshift bar made from a metal locker that had been placed on the seats of two straight-backed chairs. On the black and white checkered linoleum floor were drifts of papers. Two men—both SS officers—were arguing loudly at the bar. Their volume had less to do with their subject of discourse than it had to do with alcohol and the background noise consisting of whining ventilators, music, and artillery shells exploding above. The one with a black eye patch was rambling incoherently about Army Group Nine while the other one, who had no hair, defended his side in an unrelated argument about the possible mental effects of Eisenhower's baldness.

The girls put on another record, one that Kurt recognized: Benny Goodman's "Down South Camp Meeting." As the joint began jumpin' and others looked on from chairs and leaning places, two couples attempted jitterbugging in the cramped space while the original couple continued slow dancing. Kurt glanced at Balter, but the sergeant appeared to notice nothing as he led the way through the children and dancing couples to a closed door in another partition near the end of the hall. Opening the door, he entered first and pulled it shut behind Kurt. Curiously, the music seemed even louder. They were at yet another guard station before the top of a staircase that led deeper beneath the surface.

The small room was illuminated by a single naked bulb. At the table against the left wall was an RSD sergeant in his mid-thirties, blond-and-blue, well built, all polished and sitting in Aryan splendor with a sour expression on his face. He glanced up at the speaker which was blaring out the Benny Goodman selection. "Not exactly Bach's 'Air on the G String,' is it?" he said to Balter.

"Few pieces are, Brinkmann." He nodded toward Kurt. "This is the fellow I was sent to get."

Sgt. Brinkmann nodded and waved off Kurt's offered papers. "Go ahead. Balter, if you run across that idiot Pvt. Apel down in the Führerbunker, please tell him I am still waiting for Dr. Stumpfegger's aspirins." He looked at Kurt with an expression of sudden recognition. "Are you the fellow who's going to fix the ventilation system?"

"Yes sir."

"Don't let me keep you, then—"

The door to the canteen opened and everyone came to attention as an SS brigadier came in, a tall man with a mournful expression wearing his hat as though it were being held up by his ears. The general turned and held the door as a shorter man en-

tered, carrying the most recognizable face on Earth. Kurt stood as if paralyzed. The last time he had seen the lance corporal was in 1918 at the hospital in Beelitz.

The two sergeants saluted, boot heels snapping together. Adolf Hitler merely nodded in response, his hands clasped together tightly behind him. He glanced briefly at Kurt as he walked between Kurt and the desk sergeant toward the stairs, followed by the general. The Führer paused at the head of the stairs, turned, and looked back at Kurt.

"Wolff? Can it be? Wolff? My old comrade? Is it you? I thought you died in hospital. They took you away. Is it possible you are still alive?"

Kurt nodded. "It is possible," he said with an effort at a smile.

"God in Heaven, Wolff!" The Führer smiled, his sad eyes crinkling at the corners. "Come here. Come here and let me have a look at you."

Kurt walked over to Hitler. "Look at you." He raised a hand to grasp Kurt's arm, but it shook almost uncontrollably and he lowered it, clasping his hands in front of him. "We're a fine pair, aren't we, Wolff? My hands shake and look how gray you've gotten." Hitler faced the general. "Mohnke, you should have seen this one back in the war. What an eye. Barely twenty-one and he could part the hair on a fly's head with that Mauser." Hitler seemed to chuckle at a secret joke as he glanced down, shook his head once, then looked back at Kurt. "But no one saw you back in '17, did they, Wolff? You were the shadow. No one saw him but me. If you had a battalion of men like Wolff, Mohnke, you could hold off the Russians forever." He frowned. "Is there a problem, Kurt? Why are you here? Tell me."

"Johannes Hentschel sent for me to help him fix the ventilators."

"The ventilators?" Hitler frowned a moment almost as though Kurt's answer hadn't fit the question. "Good," said Hitler at last, a touch of disappointment in his voice. He nodded. "Good. Very good to see you again. Come and say goodbye before you leave, Kurt."

"Yes sir."

"I insist. I have so few comrades left from the first war. Come and say goodbye. It is so good to see you again."

Hitler glanced at the general, then turned and walked down the stairs, the general following closely behind. Kurt breathed and looked toward Balter and Brinkmann. Both sergeants stood there with their mouths hanging open. "We both got our decorations—Iron Cross First Class—at the same ceremony," Kurt explained. "And we were both gassed in the same attack."

"No one saw you," said Balter. "What did he mean?"

"I was on the other side of a wall when I got my award. I received mine in private."

"You were a sniper," said Sgt. Brinkmann quietly. "Of course; *Kurt Wolff*. Every recruit hears about the man with over two hundred kills." He looked at Balter. "Herr Wolff was given his Iron Cross in private to protect his identity. In the last war the Frenchies and Tommies used captured German snipers for target practice."

"I should go," he said to Balter.

"Off you go, then," Sgt. Brinkmann said to Kurt, "and may all the gods of Asgard grant you wisdom, luck, and speed."

Kurt smiled. "Thank you, Sergeant. And may the quartermaster sergeant grant you aspirin and ear plugs."

Brinkmann laughed sufficiently to reinvigorate his headache. Holding one hand over his left eye he waved Kurt and Balter on to the stairs.

As they exited from the bottom of the staircase and entered a narrow anteroom through another thick gas door, the odor was stunningly oppressive, the stench of diesel fuel overpowering everything else. It was much deeper, the sounds achieved

by Russian artillery much duller in the lower bunker. The music playing over the loudspeaker system persisted with a Louis Armstrong song. Hitler was nowhere to be seen.

Another impact above vibrated the walls and for a moment Kurt could feel the air move as the ventilation system slammed on for a few seconds, then the lights dimmed, the air stopped, and the lights came up once more. "Kurt!" cried a voice from behind. "And not a moment too soon!" A man in his late thirties wearing greasy ochre coveralls came out of the room off the anteroom to the right. He had a great shock of light-colored hair, hazel eyes, and a weary smile. Behind him was a generator making noise, fumes, and barely enough kilowatts. Hentschel reached out a hand, noted how greasy it was, then how dirty Kurt's hands were. "I suppose it will be awhile before clean hands become normal again."

"For some of us," Sgt. Balter cryptically commented beneath his breath.

Hentschel made as if to wipe his hands on Balter's dove gray uniform coat and the sergeant backed away. "Be nice, Herr Hentschel. I've brought you your man. Quite a darling of the Führer's, too."

Hentschel nodded. "Thank you, Balter. Now you can go and swill champagne with the rest of the celebrants."

Balter snorted out a laugh, handed Kurt his bag of tools and parts, and said to him, "When you're finished, Herr Wolff, always supposing the Russians don't get you first, I'll take you wherever you want to go. I'll either be in the guard quarters or at the front post where Lt. Senger was."

"Thank you, Sergeant."

"So," said Hentschel as Balter left, "the Führer remembers you."

"It would seem so." Kurt gestured with his hand toward the generator room. "You've come down in the world, my friend. This place stinks."

"My empire may be small, Wolff, but at least it's unhealthy and ill-designed."

"What would you like me to do?"

"The ventilation system in the lower bunker here is down, Kurt. It sparks on for a second or two, then cuts off. It just happened."

"I noticed."

"An open circuit, of course. I think it interferes with the front bunker's ventilation somehow, but the Vorbunker's fan motor is working. It just doesn't seem to be pushing any air down here."

"May I see the wiring schematics?"

Hentschel shook his head. "There are none."

"No schematics," Kurt said incredulously.

"You want everything handed to you on a platter? No schematics, no plans, not even anyone who ever worked on the system." He nodded in response to the look on Kurt's face. "Stupid would be too kind a term for this state of affairs. But, as it was explained to me, my friend, if there are no plans they cannot possibly fall into the wrong hands."

"Shrewd," said Kurt disdainfully.

Hentschel pulled a folded piece of paper from his hip pocket. "I've made a rough diagram of the bunker and what vent wiring I know and some I can guess at. It's a pitiful effort. I'm not even certain I've got the floor plan correct, but it's all I could manage given the circumstances. You can see the fan motor for the Vorbunker is located close to the entrance near the air filters. The bunker down here may or may not have a separate duct system. It does seem to take its power, though, from the other bunker—" The lights began to dim as the motor on the generator slowed. Hentschel cursed, turned, and ran into the generator room, worked a throttle back and forth, then flicked the glass ball of a fuel filter with the tip of his finger and

pressed a spring-loaded valve atop the filter. "Air in the line," he shouted to Kurt over the roar of the engine. "I'm bleeding it out, but I don't know where it's coming in."

Kurt entered the stifling space. "Don't you have a backup generator?"

"No."

"Alternate fuel source?"

"My friend," he shouted at Kurt, "fallback positions prepared by those who never expected to have to fall back are not very well done." He nodded toward Kurt's tool bag. "Anything in there for me?"

Kurt dropped the cloth bag on the table and opened it. "A few light switches, receptacles, some fusing wire."

"I have two switches that need repair. I can use all the fusing wire you have."

Kurt took the items out and placed them on the table. "Do you have a flashlight I might borrow? My batteries are kaput."

"Here." Hentschel handed him a light.

Kurt checked the diagram Hentschel had drawn. His eyebrows climbed. "The electrical panels are next to the showers?"

"This facility was designed by either a dungeon commandant or a suicide, my friend, not an engineer."

A return visit to the front bunker and three hours of crawling around and tracing cables confirmed that for some inexplicable reason the ventilator power for the Führerbunker came from the air filtration room in the older system, which in turn came from the generator room in the Führerbunker. The canteen party had grown in population, volume, and lubrication. It was near ten in the morning when Kurt moved back through the couples as though he were invisible. In the lower bunker he turned left off the stairs and entered the toilets to try and locate the lower bunker's fan motor.

As he walked to the rear of the WC, Kurt could hear someone in one of the stalls retching. There was no one in the shower room but the floors were wet. The strong odor of mildew overpowered even the scent of diesel fuel. The door beyond the shower room was slightly open and there was a light on behind it. There was a man in there and he was very, very still. Kurt pushed the door open with one finger and saw the figure of an SS general hanging by his neck from a wire strung from a pipe. His neck and face were swollen and deep red—signs of death by slow strangulation.

"Who is he?" Kurt asked the man retching in the shadows.

"How should I know?" the man answered, his words a mix of anger and nausea.

"Who is he?" Kurt repeated, using the tone he'd used on thousands of suspects in Berlin's police interrogation rooms.

"That is General Fegelein, Himmler's deputy. You heard the traitor Himmler tried to surrender the western armies to Eisenhower, haven't you?"

"I have now."

"Well, then, let me tell you. Gen. Fegelein had a bundle of loot and was on his way to join his boss to sell out our beloved Führer." The voice laughed. "The poor bastard paused in his apartment, though, to finish off a couple bottles of schnapps so the Russians couldn't get them. That's where they arrested him. Waste not, want not; that's what the general always said. What do you always say?"

"Get while the getting is good," answered Kurt without humor..

"Words to live by," said the voice quietly. "Indeed," he said more loudly. "Well, I guess the general doesn't want for anything now. You wouldn't happen to need a driver, would you?" asked the voice.

"Before that, my friend, I would need a car and then someplace to go. Could you stand some free advice?"

"Write it all off to Führer and Fatherland?" answered the voice.

"The words I would've used are simpler," said Kurt.

"Oh?"

"There is a storm on, son. Shut up, find a hole, get in it, and pull it in after you."

The anonymous driver chuckled once then fell silent. He was quiet for a long time. At last his voice said quietly, "Gen. Fegelein was married to Gretl Braun—Eva Braun's sister? He was the Führer's brother-in-law for almost seven hours."

"It's good to know people in high places," remarked Kurt.

The toilet flushed, a stall door slammed, the echo of a few footsteps, and there was only the steady background rumble of the generator across the hall.

The electrical panel was behind the dangling corpse. It was not like dangling corpses had been anything like a novelty in Berlin lately. Somewhat startling, however, to find out how democratic the hangmen were becoming. "Given enough time," muttered Kurt, "maybe they'll start stringing up each other."

Pushing his feelings aside, Kurt placed his bag on the top of a rickety metal shelf. Putting himself between the hanging general and the electrical panel, he pushed the corpse away from the wall with his back. Once the panel door was open, he let the general swing back. Kurt turned on Hentschel's flashlight. There were some labels scribbled in pencil on the inside of the metal door roughly corresponding to a set of fusing-wire posts in the main box. None of them referred to a ventilator fan motor. There were only four cables that went up after leaving the main fuse box, and one of them had to power the lower bunker's ventilator fan. That would be the line that had power but no load. The burned fusing wire should have been the clue, but most of the posts had been wrapped with copper wire, eliminating the need for all those pesky fuses.

Every electrician gets caught with the need to tell if a line is hot but without the proper tool. A quick way to tell if current is in a line is to momentarily short the circuit to ground with a piece of wire or a metal tool. Some hardy souls even use a finger. A quick touch and spark: the line is hot. Kurt preferred the wire or tool. Insulated, too, when one is standing in water.

He turned and looked up at the corpse. Gen. Fegelein was not standing in water. In fact he was standing on nature's best insulator: air. Kurt turned the corpse, untied the twine binding the General's wrists, and held the corpse's sleeve as he directed a lifeless claw of a finger toward a pair of contacts. "Forgive me, general. It's for the Fatherland."

There was an open circuit, hot on one side, dead on the other, which meant no load. The cable led to a conduit which angled and led through the concrete ceiling above the rooms on the opposite side of the panel room's east wall. The fan motor had to be up there and access to it had to be on the other side of the wall. According to Hentschel's diagram, on the other side of the showers and the WC's eastern wall were the apartments shared by Adolf and Eva. Leaving his assistant hanging in front of the electrical panel, Kurt went to the generator room and told this to Johannes Hentschel. The engineer took Kurt to see a slender balding fellow with a round face and squinty eyes who was Hitler's orderly, Heinz Linge. The three of them met in the large conference room in front of the Führer's office as Wolff explained the problem to Linge.

Hitler's attendant wore his SS uniform as though he might be promoted to field marshal at any moment. Everything that could shine shined, everything that could gleam gleamed. Not a speck of dandruff anywhere and of his remaining hairs there was not one out of place. Linge half listened to Hentschel, the majority of his attention nervously on the door to the office of Hitler's personal secretary, Martin Bor-

mann. Kurt sensed momentous things under way against which Linge regarded minor bunker maintenance less than significant.

"It is not a problem," he interrupted all of a sudden. "At present Miss Braun—Frau Hitler—is visiting with the Goebbels family in the Vorbunker. The Führer is in the map room. You have time." He faced Kurt. "Will the repairs take long?"

"I can't tell."

Linge stole a quick glance at his watch. "As quickly as you can, then." Hitler's attendant lowered his wrist, turned abruptly, and went through the door into Bormann's office.

"I'd best get back to the generator," said Hentschel. He held his hand out toward Hitler's apartments. "The place is yours."

Kurt pulled open the door and stepped in expecting almost anything except disappointment. Hitler's office was very small, barely room enough for the desk and the chairs behind and in front of it. To Kurt's left on the wall was a map of Berlin. On the wall behind Hitler's chair was a reproduction of someone's painting of Frederick the Great. He saw the painting itself in the next room hanging on the wall above a couch upholstered with a flowered pattern.

As he turned through a doorway to his left, entering a tiny vestibule, Kurt speculated as to why the image of Germany's founder of religious tolerance bore such a prominent place in the Führer's apartments. Frederick II also fought a lot of wars and considered himself an artist. "Two out of three," Kurt whispered to himself as he leaned through the doorway to his right and looked into the bathroom the Führer shared with his wife. There was a tub and shower in the back against a wall on the other side of which Gen. Fegelein still stood watch over the electrical panels. There were two pairs of nylon stockings hanging from the rod supporting the shower curtain and a faint touch of scent in the air.

He looked up at the ceiling. It was painted and featureless. No access. Across from the bathroom was a bedroom, Frau Hitler's judging by the clothing on the bed and chair. No access through the ceiling. Straight ahead, between the narrow walls of the vestibule, was a closet with its deep red curtain only half drawn across the opening. Kurt swept it aside and turned on the lone overhead light. The shelves along the right side held linens, towels, and sealed pasteboard boxes and crates. Opposite the shelves was a pipe suspended from the ceiling from which dozens of coats and dresses were hung on wooden hangers, again Frau Hitler's. Kurt looked up. Set in the center of the closet ceiling was an airtight access hatch, its handles dogged down tightly.

It was short work piling up enough wooden crates to reach the access hatch, and several smacks with the hammer from his bag to loosen the handles. He pulled down the door, shined the light up, and could see a chimney with hand and step holes extending up for perhaps a meter. Above the concrete, toward the bathroom side, was what looked like the gray painted housing for the ventilator fan. He could smell the odor of burned insulation. Another crate placed on top of the stack and Kurt climbed up into the chimney, put his tool bag up, and pulled himself into the cramped space above.

He could hear the tunes being played in the canteen quite clearly, which meant the ventilating systems were connected. Unless this particular fan was operating, however, the vents connecting the systems were closed. It was likely that the air in the front bunker was mostly recirculated unless it got fresh air from this system. Getting this fan working would improve both bunkers.

He found the loose connection quickly enough. Where the power line had been wired into the fan motor there was a wiring box. Once the cover was removed the story was clear. One of the lines, properly stripped and bent into a hook, had been

placed around the proper screw and the screw tightened. Instead of placing the open side of the hook to the right, however, so that the end of the wire would tighten along with the screw, the mystery installer had placed the hook's opening to the left, loosening the hook as the screw tightened. Over the subsequent months or years of vibration from fan operation, construction, and exploding bombs and artillery shells, the connection had loosened entirely.

The loose connection had welded and burned itself through, cracked and re-welded itself a number of times from the look of it. A new end was needed on the wire. Easy enough. There looked to be enough slack to trim and strip a new connection. The screw, however, was shot. Its head was loose in the wiring box and the threaded end was where it belonged: still blocking the threads. Another thing: No switch. It was wired in directly from Gen. Fegelein's electrical panel.

He closed his eyes for a second. It had been a long time since Kurt had slept and the heat in the crawlspace was tempting him. He felt his head nod and nod more deeply.

Faces—the faces of each boy, so many faces, he had seen through his scope before squeezing off a round, watching it slam through another head.

Smoking. So many of them he killed when they were lighting cigarettes. No one in the regiment understood why he used to get angry with his victims. Every army has sergeants, don't they? They tell you to stay down, don't bunch up, leave that wounded guy out there until dark, and shield those matches before you light them.

But they never listen. Rules are meant to be broken, aren't they? What a bunch of old women those sergeants are. *Down in the dirt, down in the dirt, down in the dirt!* What rubbish. You've got to relax once in a whi—

And Kurt watched as another bullet slammed through another young rebellious head. "Die, know-it-all. Explain to St. Peter how you needed another smoke."

Kurt often wondered if the snipers on the other side got angry at the young German boys they had to kill—

He snapped awake, uncertain how long he had been asleep in the crawlspace. Dust in the air. Must have been an exploding shell up above that awakened him. Taking a deep breath and letting it out, he shined the light in the wiring box. There. An unused screw and post in the box. He took the pliers from his bag, the handles wrapped with friction tape, and changed the wire from the screw panel to the motor from the useless connector to the unused one. With his screwdriver he backed off the new screw until he could get a wire behind the head, then unscrewed the clamp holding the end of the power cable in place. Pulling more cable through, he clipped off the burned end with its charred insulation. He touched the wire end against grounded metal to make certain it was hot. After wrapping the handle of his pocket knife with friction tape, he stripped the insulation off the end of the wire. Holding the insulated part of the wire in his left hand, with his right he used his pliers to bend a hook in the bare copper. Open to the right, he hooked the wire onto the screw; there was a great spark, but he held down on the wire, keeping a good contact. The fan motor began with a shudder then settled down to running quite smoothly. Still holding onto the wire, he tightened the screw. Once that was done, he retightened the clamp holding the power cable, replaced the cover, and put his tools back in his bag.

"Now to get the hell out of here," he whispered.

As he turned out the light and drew the curtain across the closet entrance, Kurt thought he heard voices. He turned and stopped in the entrance to the study. Seated on one end of the flowered couch was a young woman. She was blond and wearing a pale blue dress. She was sitting with her knees pulled up beneath her chin, her skirt

wrapped about her thighs, her heels on the couch, hands at her sides, eyes closed, her lips blue and pressed tightly together. Kurt had seen death in a great many forms and that young woman was as dead as Bonaparte.

There was a pistol on the tan cloth-covered table in front of her, what looked like a .25 semiautomatic. Next to the pistol was a small black pill box. It was open and inside it were three glass capsules. Judging from the new aroma in the room, the capsules contained cyanide.

"No more faces, Günsche. No more pleas," Kurt heard Hitler say from his office. "Do you understand me, Günsche?" A brief pause. "Tell me you understand me."

"Absolutely no one else, my Führer. You have my word."

"Very well. Give us a few minutes. Then you know what to do."

"Yes, my Führer."

The door to the conference room closed. Kurt looked fatalistically toward the right and the door Hitler would enter. When the Führer did enter the man's face was haggard. He was stooped, frail, his right hand against the doorjamb, his left hand shaking uncontrollably at his side. He had changed his clothes. He was wearing a simple uniform coat over black trousers. Instead of the gold Nazi Party pin on his coat, familiar from countless newsreels, he was wearing his WWI decorations: Iron Cross First Class, Bavarian Military Medal Third Class with Bar, and the Cross of Military Merit for wounds received in action. He glanced at Kurt, nodded uncomprehendingly, then shifted his gaze to the body of his wife of only a few hours. His mouth opened as if to say something, then it closed. He raised his shaking right hand, gestured toward her as if to say, "So there," and let his hand fall to his side.

"She's dead," said Hitler.

"Yes."

Hitler leaned his right shoulder against the doorjamb, closed his eyes, and folded his arms across his chest. "My hands tremble, Wolff." He opened his eyes, glanced at the corpse, and faced Kurt. "My hands tremble, she is dead, the Russian is at my doorstep." Another sad smile. "But I see the ventilators are working."

"Yes sir."

"I must congratulate you on being one of the few in the Reich's employ today who actually accomplished what he set out to do. I usually don't allow the ventilator to operate when I am in a room. Did you know that?"

"No."

"Gas. In the end they will come at me with gas. Bullets, bombs, nothing works. Gas, Wolff. That's how they'll try if they get the chance."

"The ventilator is on now."

Hitler shrugged. "I'm not concerned. This is a special day." Again he waved his hand at Eva Hitler *née* Braun. "Look at her, Wolff. I've dictated my political testament, had the cyanide capsules tested on my dog, said goodbye to my staff, I've given instructions to my personal adjutant what to do with our remains—everything figured out down to the very last detail." He lowered his hand and dropped his gaze to the deep red carpet. "You see how she sits, Wolff. Like a little girl, her feet on the couch. I don't know how many times I've seen her sit this way. Drop on the couch or a chair, pull her legs up at the same time, and every so often tap her chin with her knees. She'd even hurt herself at times. Bite a lip or her tongue. 'Slow down,' I'd tell her, 'and you won't hurt yourself.' You know what she'd say to me, Wolff?"

"What?"

"Hooey. Hooey phooey, Herr Wolff"—Herr Wolff was her nickname for me, you know. Code name leftover from my party days. You didn't know we were named the same, did you, Wolff?"

"No. I didn't."

"Hooey' and she'd laugh. Next time she sat she'd make an even bigger show of pulling up her knees." He chuckled ironically. "Such rebelliousness."

"And this time when she tapped her chin," said Kurt, "she had a little glass capsule held between her teeth."

"Indeed." Hitler moistened his lips, blinked, and nodded. "Getting ready for me, I suppose," he said. "Did you talk with her before this happened?"

"No. I was up in the crawlspace repairing the fan motor. When I came down she was like this."

Hitler turned abruptly to his right, pulled out a chair before a small blond wooden desk, and sat down. He looked at what was on his desk. Its surface had a few papers neatly stacked in a corner beneath a magnifying glass. In the center of the desk were two white china plates side by side, each one containing a piece of chocolate cake. Next to each plate was a white linen napkin and a silver dessert fork.

"Chocolate cake," said Adolf Hitler. "Before you go I have a favor to ask of you, my friend." He nodded with his head toward a chair to the side of the desk. "But first, sit. Have some cake. The army is starving and we shall eat chocolate cake."

As he sat in the chair, Kurt burst out with a nervous laugh.

The Führer frowned. "You think that's funny? The army starving?"

"No. Of course not. It was a joke of my grandfather's. The way you said that reminded me."

"A joke."

"Yes."

Hitler leaned back in his chair, clasped his hands together in his lap, and said, "Tell me your grandfather's joke about the German army starving, Wolff."

Kurt looked at the corpse of the Führer's wife, realizing as he did so that telling Grandpa Mathe's joke to Adolf Hitler would reveal all that he had been trying to hide for the past twelve years. He tried to think of another, but there simply wasn't any other joke to replace it. "Sir, with your new wife—"

Hitler nodded and tapped an impatient fingertip against the edge of the desktop. "I am a man who could use a laugh, Wolff. Tell me your grandfather's joke."

Kurt remembered the old man with his wide eyes, wild gray beard, and sweeping hand gestures as he would tell the joke about the Jew and the chicken. *And if you're going to perform, boy, perform.*

"Very well." Kurt stood and said, "A Jew is walking down a country lane and he is leading a skinny little chicken by a piece of string he has tied around the bird's neck. Along comes this German soldier. The soldier stops the Jew and says, 'Jew, is that your chicken?'

"Yes sir, this is my chicken," answers the Jew.

"Jew, what do you feed your chicken?" demands the soldier.

"I feed my chicken corn, sir," the Jew answers.

"So, you feed your chicken corn while the German army is starving?" bellows the soldier, and he beats the Jew within an inch of his life."

Like Grandpa Mathe used to, Kurt bent over, placed one hand to his back, the other holding the imaginary piece of string. "So the Jew continues down the road leading his chicken until he chances to meet another soldier coming the other way. 'Jew,' says the soldier, 'is that your chicken?'

"Yes, sir," answers the Jew nodding sadly, "this is my chicken."

"Jew, what do you feed your chicken?" demands the soldier.

"Sir, I feed my chicken . . . barley," the Jew answers.

"You feed your chicken barley while the German army is starving?" bellows the soldier, and he beats the Jew within an inch of his life."

Kurt bent over even further, his knees bent, one hand still to his back, the other

still holding the imaginary piece of string. "So the Jew picks himself up again and continues down the lane leading his chicken until he chances to meet still another soldier coming the other way. 'Jew,' says the third soldier, 'is that your chicken?'"

Kurt looked about, his eyes rolling, where-oh-where to hide this damnable bird. Hitler chuckled, then laughed out loud. "Yes, sir," answers the Jew, "this is my chicken."

"Jew, what do you feed your chicken?" demands the soldier.

Kurt stood upright and shrugged. "Eh, I give him two pfennigs and let him buy what he wants."

"Haw!" roared Hitler. "Haw!" he roared again. He chuckled twice more, his eyes staring at the plates of cake, his shoulders shaking. "Buy what he wants," he repeated. He shook his head and stared into an unfathomable distance.

"Wolff," he said at last, looking up at him. "You are something of a mystery. Always have been. I worked out of regimental headquarters. No secrets from the runner. I knew when you got your Iron Cross Second Class, your fiftieth kill. I knew when we got our Iron Cross First Class awards together. That was for your two hundredth kill. You were quite a hero of mine." He looked from the cake to Kurt's face. "And it was right there in your record: You were a Jew."

"There were a great many Jews fighting for Germany in the last war." Kurt shrugged, arched his brows, and sat back in the chair, a hand on each knee. "But my grandfather would disagree with you."

"Disagree?"

"About me being a Jew. 'Policeman,' he used to call me like it had a bad taste. 'Policeman.' He addressed my father the same. My father was a police inspector in Munich. I followed him into the department."

"But your grandfather was a Jew."

"Grandpa Mathe was more Jewish than Moses. He was a rabbi. We always suspected he had his own autographed copy of the Ten Commandments." Kurt glanced at his host. "There are rumors that your grandfather was Jewish."

"They're all lies."

"Is that why you had your father's village turned into an artillery range?"

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The Führer stared at the chocolate cake, blinked, and said, "Each of us has had to make sacrifices for the Fatherland."

Kurt held out his hand toward the cake and Hitler nodded. Although his throat was partially blocked by his heart, the cake, after filling his mouth with heavenly moist fragrance, slid effortlessly down Kurt's throat. "My God, this is incredible cake."

"Better than those wormy biscuits we used to get in the trenches, eh, Wolff?" Hitler nodded as he took a bite of his and talked around it. "Constanze Manziarly baked this. She does excellent baking," he said, "and German chocolate is the world's best." Hitler placed his fork on the side of his plate, took his napkin, wiped his mouth, dropped the napkin next to his cake, and stared at it. "About this favor I must ask, Wolff."

Kurt took another bite of his cake. "You let me live and what do I do?"

"Very simple. You shoot me." He tapped the right side of his head. "Right here, in the temple." He faced Kurt. "Not too much to ask of an old comrade, is it?"

Slowly Kurt placed his fork on the plate, waiting for more. There had to be more.

"You look puzzled, Wolff. You were always very smart. You didn't kill that sniper whose bullet had my name all over it by being slow." Hitler moved his chair around until he was facing the couch. He nodded toward his new bride. "She was supposed to be sitting at the opposite end of that couch. I was to be sitting where she is. I'm right-handed, you see."

Kurt studied the scene and returned his gaze to the Führer's face. "She was going to shoot you with—not with that little .25."

"No," said Hitler as he pulled open the desk's center drawer and withdrew a Walther 7.62. "With this one." His hand shook as he placed the gun on the napkin next to his cake. "A present from Bormann."

"She shoots you with the Walther, drops the gun where you might have dropped it had you done the deed yourself, then she crunches down on the cyanide capsule and maybe shoots herself with the .25 in the bargain. It's got to look like Gotter-dammerung, doesn't it? Twilight of the gods, going out like a hero. But your hand shakes too badly to aim properly and the Valkyries don't come and collect up heroes who accidentally shoot off their own noses."

"Said rather mockingly, Wolff, but you have the essence of the predicament." Hitler nodded, his eyes crinkling as he smiled. "Yes. Bormann, Linge, Günsche: they'll be the first ones in here. If any of them out there live past the end of the war, they'll be in the history books telling stories about this day." He waved a hand expansively. "The last days of the Third Reich—What did you see, Herr Linge?" He looked at Kurt. "What would they answer if all I did was blow off my own nose; shoot off my mustache." He studied the 7.62 for a moment. Nodding, he pulled the drawer open even further lifting a 9mm Pistole '08 from it. He checked the magazine, jacked a round into the chamber, and held out the handle to Kurt. "Perhaps this one is more to your liking. You ought to know how to operate it. You had one back in our war."

"I'm not a murderer."

Hitler put the Luger down next to Kurt's cake. "A Jew giving up a chance to kill Adolf Hitler? It can't be because you are a coward, Wolff. I saw you in the war. That one assault when the French were coming, our wire all blasted to pieces, and if they caught you with that rifle and scope it would have been all over for you, but you kept at it, shot after shot, taking out officers and noncoms. Twice you sent someone back for ammunition. You aren't a coward, Wolff. It cannot be because you're squeamish. A sniper with two hundred ghosts in his pockets? How many heads have you shattered?" He stood, picked up the Walther 7.62 from his desk, and said, "You are ridiculous, Wolff."

"I'm not a murderer."

"If the French had taken you that day they would have executed you for what you did. We all knew they did that to our snipers."

"That made them murderers." Kurt watched as Hitler walked over to the couch and sat next to his wife's corpse.

"What is the difference?"

"The law," answered Kurt. "That's the difference."

"Policemen and rules, rules and policemen," Hitler said mockingly. He looked up at Kurt. "Am I a murderer?"

"One of the biggest the world has ever seen."

"Not by German law, Wolff. Not by German rules. Every death you and the other Jews of the world would charge against me was either legal or not of my doing." He checked the load on the 7.62 and snapped the clip back into the grip. Resting the hand holding the pistol on his right thigh, he said, "There is one more thing you should consider, Wolff. At this very moment in the main conference room are a dozen or more generals and other advisors of mine who have been begging me for weeks to go to Berchtesgaden and continue fighting the war from the mountains. It makes sense. I could be there in hours and Berlin is militarily indefensible. Even so, look how long we've held out. Fifty thousand lives a mile, Wolff. That's what we're costing the Bolsheviks and they hold all the cards. What do you think the price will be in the mountains, eh? I'd have fresh troops, abundant supplies, enough ammunition to keep us for two years, good defensive positions. Consider the price." He nodded to himself, then fixed Kurt with his gaze. "I tell you this, Wolff: Either do this favor for me or bear the responsibility when I tell my generals to break out for Berchtesgaden." He tossed the Walther on the carpet by his feet. "You once saved my life, Wolff. The responsibility for it is yours."

Once again the world's dead crowded the edges of their graves, reached out their wasted arms, fixed Kurt with their sunken stares, and beckoned.

Hitler turned to his left and let his gaze fall upon his dead wife. Kurt's mouth was as dry as leather, his hands almost without feeling but with lives of their own. He watched as his hand picked up the 9mm from the desk, the second hand joining the first to steady his aim, and fired, the round striking Hitler exactly in his right temple. The man's head jerked toward the wall, he slumped forward, and came to rest leaning slightly toward the woman. The sound of the shot still seemed to be rebounding from the concrete walls.

Kurt looked at the smoking gun in his hand, stunned that he had done it. He couldn't sort it out. The effort made him lightheaded. The portrait of Frederick the Great had Hitler's blood and brain tissue on it. The entrance wound was clean.

"My god," he mumbled to himself, the ineptness of his actions glaring at him. He was standing there over a fresh corpse with a smoking gun in his hand.

There was a noise from the office. Kurt turned and rushed back into the vestibule closet, silently pulling the curtain across the opening. So many different thoughts—a panicky craving to breathe hard—a vital need for complete silence—his mind rushing to prepare a defense he couldn't possibly survive: It wasn't murder. Assisted suicide; euthanasia, perhaps. Complicity in perpetrating a fraud, certainly. Ending a nightmare in the first degree. And how could he convince an angry drumhead Nazi court that, out of all the devoted followers there in the bunker, shaky old Adolph had picked a Jew to send him to Valhalla?

It seemed to take forever for someone to come. First Kurt heard Heinz Linge call out to someone, "It's done."

Kurt peered between the curtain and the right side of the closet door. Linge came into view first. Martin Bormann next, staggering slightly. Kurt recognized the doughy balding man from the newsreels. He was followed by a sad-eyed blond fellow in his mid-twenties wearing an SS uniform. "Günsche," Bormann said to the sad-eyed blond man. "You'd better tell the others."

After Günsche left, Bormann and Linge stood looking at the bodies. "It is the end of it," said Bormann. "The end of it all."

After a few moments, Linge said, "My God."

"What, Linge?" Bormann sounded just a touch sloshed.

"On the floor. Isn't that the pistol you gave him when the French surrendered?"

"Yes. And?"

"For God's sake, Bormann, look at the wound. I know a 9mm entrance wound when I see one." He picked Hitler's gun up off the carpet. "This is a 7.62." He sniffed at it, then held it out. "It hasn't even been fired!"

"What are you saying, Linge? The Führer is not really dead?"

"Don't be absurd! Someone killed him."

"Linge. *Linge!*" drunkenly insisted Bormann. "So he had a little help. So what?"

"We should tell Rattenhuber."

Bormann held up both palms. "Don't be an idiot. Think, Linge. Think. You know how the Führer's hands shook. It was not certain he could handle a gun by himself. Perhaps he needed a little help."

"But the man who killed him—"

"What if it was Eva Braun? Are you insane? You want to have an investigation? The world is coming down around our ears, Linge, and you want to wait around, form a committee, hold hearings? Perhaps Marshal Zhukov will be kind enough to preside." Bormann pushed Linge's arm. "Go. Get blankets to wrap these bodies. *Go!*"

"The skin around the wound," persevered Linge. "There's no powder burns. You've seen people shot at close range—"

"I tend to be elsewhere."

"Look at the spatter on the wall, Bormann! Look at it! The one who shot him had to be standing right where you are now!"

"Go. Get the blankets. Put this nonsense out of your head and go!" urged Bormann. As Linge reluctantly moved into Hitler's bedroom, Martin Bormann looked down at the body of his fallen leader. He bent over and looked more closely. He straightened, rubbed his eyes, and slowly turned toward the vestibule, his face in a frown.

Kurt looked down at the pistol in his hand. He couldn't kill everyone. He placed the weapon on the shelf. Perhaps Hitler was right. Perhaps saving his life did make Kurt responsible for everything that followed.

Bormann walked over to the closet and swept the curtain aside. He frowned, turned on the light, and walked through Kurt as he went to the back of the closet to look behind the clothing rack.

"Bormann?" called Heinz Linge.

"Back here," he answered. "I thought someone was back here."

"Well?"

Bormann stood, shrugged, and said, "Nothing. My god, it's cold in here." He turned and walked through Kurt as he returned to the living room. Linge handed Bormann a blanket and himself began wrapping Hitler's body with a second blanket. Bormann straightened out Eva's legs and covered her.

Linge and someone from the RSD carried out Adolf Hitler's body. Bormann carried out Eva Hitler's. Soon they were all gone.

The ghost held his hand up in front of his face and looked through it. Hitler had been right. In that hospital outside Berlin after they'd been gassed in 1918, Kurt Wolff had died. If he had been responsible for the lance corporal's life he'd saved in 1918, he wondered, would he now be responsible for the lives he saved by killing his old comrade?

Kurt left the apartment and moved toward the stairs to the surface, the pungent odor of tobacco smoke joining the music and other odors in the air. No problem with communications, he mused. Word of the Führer's death, apparently, traveled swiftly. ○

"Last year," Robert Reed says, "when my daughter was in second grade, she wrote a story about being dragged out of bed in the middle of the night. Her mother and I told her that she had to hurry, that we were making an emergency trip to Disneyland. She didn't hesitate. In the story, she was packed in minutes, and we were on our way. So what is an 'emergency trip to Disneyland?'" It may not be quite what we expect, but at least it's . . .

PRETTY TO THINK SO

Robert Reed

Emergency

Cory was asleep and then he wasn't asleep. He was dreaming and then there wasn't any dream. There was only his father kneeling beside the bed—a big urgent man with a quick voice that wanted to scream, that needed to scream, but was refusing to let itself become loud.

"Wake up, Cory. Wake up. Are you awake?"

Cory nodded and rolled over, his eyes closing again.

"Get up, son. This is important."

"Dad—?"

"I mean it. Get up."

The clock on the nightstand showed three red threes standing in a row. Cory had trouble telling time, but this was early. He knew that much. People should be sleeping. The world should be asleep. Except Dad was inside his room and the hallway was full of light, and, shouting from the nursery, Mom said, "Get him ready, Jim. Come on."

Dad stood up, knees cracking. Grabbing Cory's backpack, he spilled out the papers and pens before opening the drawers of the dresser, shoving random clothing into the empty pockets. "Up, Cory. I mean it."

"Why?"

"There's an emergency."

The boy sat up slowly. "What emergency?"

All motion stopped while Dad considered his next words. Then a siren began wailing in the distance, and Mom sounded like she was crying. And that's when a slow strange smile broke out on his father's weary face, and with a voice as relieved as it was confident, he said, "We're making an emergency trip to Disneyland."

"Really, Dad?"

"Really. Right now. So use the potty, get your clothes on, and let's get on the road!"

"God Bless Us All!"

Jim didn't usually stay up past midnight, but earlier that evening he pushed his way through the final chapters of a political thriller. Scandal, murder, and kinky sex made for a lot of fun, and afterwards he was too keyed up to sleep. He checked on the kids and Nance before returning to the living room. An Ava Gardner marathon was running on Turner Classics. One of the delights of being a middle-aged man was an easy lust for dead actresses. Jim happily settled down to watch Gregory Peck and Ava face the end of the world, and he managed to stay awake long enough to catch the beginning of *The Sun Also Rises*, watching poor Tyrone Power loving one of the world's great broads yet not being able to do a damned thing about it.

His eyes closed during one of the bullfights. Most nights Jim would have stayed asleep in his lounger until morning, somebody on the television started talking, the voice loud and insistent. Then someone else made noise about an unfolding emergency, some kind of international trouble, and that's when his brain jolted itself awake.

CNN had taken over TCM. The man behind the desk was young and unfamiliar—a weekend anchor barely above the rank of intern. But rapidly unfolding events had dropped in this lap, and the youngster smelled opportunity. Sitting forward in his chair, he looked enthusiastic. Effervescent. Thrilled. "We're waiting for a statement from the president," he explained, and probably not for the first time. "Details are scarce. Officials are refusing to comment. But White House sources claim that high-level meetings began after midnight, Eastern Daylight Time. Since then, United States military forces have been put on alert. One early report mentioned an accident at Los Alamos, but that has been denied. Also, at this moment there is no evidence that either Russia or China have made overt moves toward war." The correspondent paused for a moment, calming himself before admitting, "Within the last twenty minutes, Washington has begun contacting governors, and martial law will soon be . . .

"Wait." The young man interrupted himself, pressing a finger to his ear. "We're switching live to the White House."

Jim jumped up and sprinted into the master bedroom, shaking Nance until she sat up, gasping.

"Out in the living room," he ordered. "Hurry."

Neither one of them voted for the president, but they had grown comfortable with his grandfatherly presence. Yet this didn't seem like the same man. The hour and lack of makeup made him look even older than normal. Judging by the persistent grimace, the president was in some kind of pain. Anybody could see that he was terrified. With a flat, labored tone, he reassured his tiny audience that every precaution was being taken, that the government was still functioning, and whatever happened, citizens should remain calm.

"Calm about what?" Nance muttered.

"I don't know," Jim began. "Maybe some sort of—"

"Comet? Did he just say—?"

"Or an asteroid," the president added, as if defining the astronomical beast genuinely mattered. Then he paused, yanking papers from a hastily assembled stack of notes and reports and abbreviated briefings. Those next moments were necessary to gather his wits. Fifty years of experience on the public stage were barely enough to keep his voice from breaking. "The asteroid was discovered several hours ago," he reported with a flat slow agonizing voice. "Approaching from an unexpected direction, and there is no doubt that it's going to strike the earth. In another ninety-five min-

utes, I'm told. Yes. The impact will take place in the Pacific, far from the mainland, but earthquakes and tsunamis will spread the damage across a wide, wide portion of the world.

"Listen to me. Listen."

"This is going to be a very bad day for the world. We don't know the exact dimensions of this disaster. But if you live near the West Coast, it is imperative—imperative—that you leave immediately. Pack nothing. Drive east. Minutes matter, and you mustn't waste time."

"God bless us all, and good luck!"

One Wonderful Day

Without doubt or complaint, Cory accepted the adventure. But his silly little sister couldn't. Even when things were wonderful, Amy had to cry. She was crying now, screaming and dripping tears and holding her stupid sea turtle while tugging at the straps of her little-girl chair. She practically begged Mom to come into the back seat and keep her company.

Mom was listening to the radio. She and Dad had a loud fight when they were leaving the house. Dad wanted to know why the van was out of gas, and Mom wanted to call Grandma again, and Dad started throwing grocery sacks into the trunk of his car, and Mom asked if it was smart to waste time with clothes and crappy canned goods?

"We're a long ways from the sea," Dad said. "And we're going to need these supplies."

"When we get to Disneyland," thought Cory, leaping into the back seat.

They were still on the driveway when Mom tried calling Grandma again. And she kept trying once they were underway. But nobody answered and she finally gave up. Now she was bent forward, listening to the speaker in her door. She listened right up until Amy suddenly fell asleep.

On the radio, Cory heard a man saying, "Listen to me. Listen."

Mom turned down the volume.

"Same old, same old," said Dad.

"Quiet."

They were driving on the highway. Buildings appeared in the distance, lit up by signs and streetlamps, and suddenly they were close, almost blurring as their car streaked past them.

"So try your mom again," Dad said.

Mom looked at her phone. "I told you. She turns hers off at night."

"She'll be awake by now," he said. "The sirens will get her up."

"What about her pills?"

"Even drugged, the woman's going to hear something."

"God, Jim. You make her sound like an addict."

"Sorry."

"My call isn't going through."

"Too many people trying," said Dad. Then he cursed and pushed his foot down, and the tires made a bright squealing sound.

When they first got to the highway, it was almost empty. But cars were coming from everywhere, everybody moving in the same direction now. It was like there was a race going on. Except for Dad who had to slow down suddenly, cursing and jumping lanes, and the tires made more noise. Sitting up tall in his big-boy seat, Cory saw

several cars stuck together. There was fire and smoke, and he smelled the oily smoke, and, impressed beyond words, he turned around to watch the accident shrink and then vanish behind them.

"We're lucky," said Dad.

Mom didn't seem to hear him. She was slumped forward, one ear pushed close to the radio speaker.

"Why?" Cory asked.

Nobody noticed him.

"Why, Dad?"

"Why what, son?"

"Why are we lucky?"

That brought a thoughtful silence. Mom looked at Dad, and Dad clung to the steering wheel, and the engine changed its sound, humming louder, and the whole car began to shake as they moved even faster than before.

"I know why we're lucky," the seven-year-old volunteered.

"Yeah, buddy?" Dad replied. "Why's that?"

Then a new voice came on the radio. Mom said, "Quiet," and got low again, listening hard. Dad listened as he drove. They were out ahead of the worst of the traffic. They didn't need to hear why they were lucky. Everybody knew. Except for Amy, sleeping through all the fun. That's what Cory was thinking, sitting back in his big-boy seat and closing his eyes, imagining the wonderful day to come.

Take A Laser

Sure, the Secret Service talked a mean game. Their reputation was that each of them would take a bullet for their president, and before morning coffee too. According to their own press, every threat was considered serious, and nobody was above suspicion. They were a tough, highly trained team of warriors—the modern Praetorian guards—ready to defend their emperor to the last man and last woman. But all of that was just public smoke. The real Secret Service was a bunch of bright, humorless souls trained to respond to predictable threats and prosaic madmen. And there was nothing conventional or ordinary about tonight's threat.

Joan was sitting outside the Oval Office, watching people walk in nervous and walk out again, terrified. While the door was open, voices were heard. She knew the president's voice, and Higgins's. The Chief of Staff was always loud, but this was different. "Somebody is goddamn to blame," he roared. "And don't you tell me otherwise!"

The door was still open. A voice she didn't know tried to tell him otherwise, talking slowly, quietly. It was a teacher's voice, if she had to guess.

Three strangers were meeting with the president. Joan knew their names and the branch of government that they had climbed down from, but nobody seemed eager to involve the security detail in those particulars. On a whim, she Googled one of the names and found a website to an NSF project in Hawaii. For a couple of minutes, she read about astronomers watching the universe, but instead of telescopes, they were using a giant brick of fancy metal, searching for clues into the composition and behavior of dark matter.

Dark matter couldn't have meant less to Joan. She never liked science, never would. Practicality was her strength, and the practical answer was that this Hawaiian lab was a convenient cover for something more important than a team of nerds hunting for ghostly theoretical particles.

She went to Wikipedia to read up on cosmology. A few minutes later, the Chief of

Staff emerged from the Oval Office, looking at a collection of strong men and one strong woman, everybody waiting for orders that he couldn't deliver.

"Screw the chain of command," Higgins seemed to decide.

He approached Joan—she was closest—and with a stern expression and tight, quaking voice, he reported, "Something bad is happening."

She nodded, amazed how quickly the terror grabbed hold of her.

"We have to move as many people as possible," he said. "To safety," he said. "What we're planning to do . . . we're going to tell the public that a comet is about to hit. But that's just the cover story. Get people scared enough to run, but not causing a total meltdown panic."

The agent beside Joan was a twenty-year man, imaginative as a fencepost and legendary for his poise.

"The cover story is a comet?" he cried out. "What the hell's worse than a comet?"

Higgins sighed, making ready to lie.

This was what people did when they were inventing a story. Joan knew that expression and the purposeful silence that went with it. Yet she couldn't find any reason not to believe the man when he stated what sounded utterly impossible. With a clear, rock-certain voice, he told the president's Praetorians, "We are being invaded. Aliens are coming. The earth is under attack!"

Such a ludicrous, juvenile story, yet just like that, Joan was trying to figure out the best way to throw her body in front of a laser beam—as if that could do any damn good.

Extraordinary Circumstances

Jim finally told Nance it was time to stop calling her mom. That was an awful thing to say, but he had good reasons. He really did. Nance responded with surprise and reflexive anger, eyes glaring at him in the darkness. But as she started to talk again—as soon as she began asking what kind of monster said such things—Jim pointed out, "It's too late, darling. The president's second address was pretty damn specific. Ten, eleven minutes from now, it hits. The asteroid is here. Either your mother knows or she doesn't. If she does, then she's driving right behind us. But if she's still asleep, why wake her up? Unless you want to make her last moments into a horrible nightmare, that is."

Cold as it was, his logic had its deserved impact. Nance wept quietly. Her anger persisted, but at least she dropped the useless phone back into her useless purse. Maybe for the first time she began to consider their future. The world was about to be remade. An unprecedented disaster was looming, and they were carrying a week's worth of food and little else. A long glance into the back seat told her that the kids were still sleeping. That was good news. Then she insisted on holding one of Jim's hands, as if they were dating again. Jim kept the Accord at ninety-five, the front end shaking from the abuse. But he left just that one hand on the wheel, holding her hand, waiting until she finally asked, "Where exactly are we going?"

"East," he stated. "As far as possible."

"Where east?"

He had no idea. Yet she wanted a destination, something concrete and familiar, and that's why he said, "Vegas."

"Why?"

"We know it."

She dwelled on that for a while. Then with an edge to the voice, she said, "Everybody's going there. We should think of someplace else."

"You're right," he admitted. "Rand-McNally's under the seat. The flashlight is in the glove compartment."

Bending, she asked, "How much farther can we drive?"

Jim retrieved his hand just before a patch of rough road. "We've got another two hundred miles in the tank, maybe." Holding tight to the wheel, he admitted, "We're way ahead of the rush now. So we can probably gas up somewhere along the way, if we want."

Nance settled into her research.

And Jim was pleased with himself. He thought about all the kinds of luck that had found them. He happened to wake up in time and hear the warning. They started with a full tank of gas, and inside the trunk were sacks of lunchmeat and canned food and other treasures. It was hard to imagine any tsunami with the height or muscle to reach them here. Even the mother-in-law situation was a blessing. The old gal might have picked up the phone and panicked, refusing to save herself. Then Nance would have made them drive over to her house, and all of them would be doomed. But when Jim looked at the whole night, he decided that his finest moment came with Cory. Their son could have been a nightmare. He wanted to know where were they going, and one wrong word would have started a screaming fit that would have made this drive into even more of a nightmare. But when Jim opened his mouth, that beautiful perfect lie about Disneyland just sprang out.

At the time, he felt wicked. But didn't things end up all right? Both kids were sound asleep, innocent and untroubled by the coming madness. Jim couldn't help but smile about that. And his mother-in-law was someone else's problem. And he didn't have to go to work Monday. Imagining the new world, he wondered how many times ordinary men were flung into extraordinary circumstances, but then managed to succeed beyond anyone's expectations

Jim was going to be one of those great successes.

That's what he told himself and that's what he believed, pushing their car past one hundred miles an hour, ignoring the rattles and shimmies as he raced hard toward the Sierra Nevadas.

Mirror

The astronomer's face reddened, features twisting in agony. His head was tilted, concentrating on the voice buzzing in his ear. When he couldn't stand it anymore, he said, "Shit, no." He said, "This is what I told them." Then he let loose, unleashing what seemed to be one enormous sentence, talking about mirror matter and "the facility" and something called pepper effects, and he finished by saying, "Yes, and the scalar transmutations, yes." Then after a brief pause, he began talking again, throwing out what seemed to be a tangle of arbitrary syllables and random lettering—the dense personal language of someone trying to prove his expertise to whoever was listening to his tirade.

Joan drifted closer.

The astronomer noticed her, absently lifting one hand.

Gazing east, watching the sun and the impossibly green mountains, Joan realized that she wasn't quite as terrified as before. Certainly not like when the helicopters were lifting off from DC, carrying the bare-boned essentials of the government into the wilderness. At the time, that airborne caravan seemed to be a peculiar tactic: If Hollywood had taught people anything it was that aliens could shoot down slow-moving planes. Yet someone decided that the president needed to be in West Virginia, hidden inside the deepest bunkers, and the best way to go there was to fly. But

as soon as they touched down, someone else decided there wouldn't be any journey underground. Apparently the nuclear-hardened facility afforded no more protection than did the skies and lush trees.

Whatever the truth, Joan didn't know it. When pressed for an explanation, the twenty-year man—older and far wiser—stared at his toes, and after hard consideration declared, "Fuck if I know."

To keep the agents busy, each was given some tiny task. Joan was responsible for a piece of ground near the perimeter, and that's what she was defending when she noticed the astronomer standing in the sunlight, arguing passionately with the voice inside a secure sat-phone.

"Well, Marvin," the astronomer said. "I guess I didn't do the job you wanted. Maybe I screwed up. But maybe you shouldn't have been playing around with this shit in the first place."

The invisible Marvin offered a few conciliatory words.

And the astronomer shook his head. "Yeah, you should have talked to the president. Not me." The empty hand was still raised, forgotten. Looking at the mountains, he shook his head even as he made agreeable sounds. "I know. You were really busy. You and your team were fighting the cascade. Which you didn't manage to stop, or even slow down appreciably, by the way."

The buzzing voice began.

But the astronomer cut him off. "I warned you, Marv. Didn't I? Didn't I? This wasn't my project. We are colleagues, and that's all. You woke me in the middle of the night with a crazy story, and then you told me to explain what I don't understand to a room full of people who failed high school physics."

The astronomer stopped talking, waiting for the reply.

Nothing seemed to happen.

One last time, he said, "Marvin?" His back straightened, eyes round, and he turned until he was facing Joan. His empty hand was still floating between them. He lowered his arm gradually, as if the motion took an enormous amount of strength. "I just lost the connection," he admitted.

"Call Marvin back," she suggested.

Which seemed too obvious. No, he preferred to stare at the sat-phone, apparently puzzled by its nature. Then he tried to set it on the picnic table beside him, but his hand was shaking and he missed, watching numbly as the expensive machine landed hard on the graveled yard.

"Maybe later," he said. "I'll try again later."

Joan approached until she was beside him, taking one deep breath before asking, "What's really happening?"

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He winced and dropped his eyes.

"The president wants an update," she lied. Though it wasn't much of a lie: What rational creature wouldn't crave the latest news?

The astronomer sucked at his teeth.

"You're going to tell me," she insisted. "What's mirror matter, and what does it have to do with us?"

"Mirror matter is everywhere, and it means everything."

"Okay," she managed.

He leaned against the picnic table, breaking into a lecturer's voice. "Most of the universe is profoundly dark. Except for a few percentage points of normal matter, we can't touch or taste, much less see, most of what is out there. Mirror matter wants nothing to do with the likes of us. Most of the time, the only thing we feel is its gravitational pull."

"Dark matter," she guessed.

"One species of dark matter, yes." Both hands swirled in the bright air. "The Hilo Experiment was testing a hypothesis. If our new models are accurate, something like mirror matter will, with help and on very rare occasions, turn baryonic. That means it becomes a neutron or proton. You know, something like us. And by the same token, sometimes normal matter becomes dark. Researchers on Hilo . . . my old friend Marvin . . . these people were watching for atoms emerging from nothing, and sometimes they would coax our atoms to vanish into this ghostly other realm."

"So why?" Joan pressed. "Why should I care?"

"The experiment was designed to run both ways," he explained. "Which made sense, because that doubled our odds of seeing interesting results. But the problem is...what I kept trying to explain to the president . . ."

His voice fell away.

"What about the aliens?" she demanded.

"Right. The aliens." He laughed softly and desperately, wiping at one eye with the back of a hand. "You see, the work was going normally. For months and months, the data was pretty much following the predictions. Then all of a sudden and for no good reason, the transmutation began running hard in one direction. A trillion trillion trillion trillion times faster than anybody imagined possible, the baryons in the detector were turning into their mirror equivalents. I explained what I could to the president. I described how Marvin was busy trying to suffocate the cascade before it breached the reaction chamber. But that Chief of Staff . . . that ignorant prick . . . he kept seeing conspiracies. Evil influences. He wanted to know what mirror matter looked like. What did it want? Maybe I was stupid, but I mentioned speculations that there are worlds made of the stuff. A world set on top and inside our own planet, and we don't even know it. Different EM rules and nuclear forces, and maybe there's odd kinds of life in this alternate realm. I warned everybody that this wasn't my specialty. And really, nobody knows anything for certain. But people . . . you know how people are. We hear something that sounds a little familiar, and right away we jump to the easiest conclusion. I said, 'Life,' and he heard, 'Alien.' I talked about the runaway cascade, and he heard, 'Invasion.'"

"So there's no invasion?" Joan asked hopefully.

"Aliens from space coming to conquer us?" The astronomer hesitated, grimacing as he bent and retrieved the phone. Then he was laughing, shaking his head slowly as he explained to her and maybe to himself, "Aliens would be easy. A pack of blood-hungry monsters might at least listen to reason."

She stepped back, trembling now.

He glanced at his watch.

In the distance, someone shouted a few words . . . something about losing Hawaii . . .

The astronomer looked up, nothing like surprise in his face. He was angry but continued laughing in a loud, despairing fashion. Speaking to the trees and sky, he confessed, "What I want to know, if someone can please tell me . . . how the hell did all of this unravel so easily. . . ?"

BRAT

I DID NOTHING
NOTHING?
I (TASTED)
(TASTED) WHAT?
SHADOWS
I TOLD YOU ABOUT SHADOWS ABOUT WHAT THEY MEAN ABOUT WHY
THEY ARE SCARCE ABOUT RESPONSIBILITY ABOUT BEING GOOD
YES (FATHER) YOU TAUGHT ME
YOU (TASTED)?
YES
NOTHING ELSE?
*
(LOOK) AT ME
*
DID THE (TASTES) (SPEAK) TO YOU?
MAYBE
DID YOU (TOUCH) THEM (SON)?
NO
BECAUSE (TOUCHING) CAUSE TROUBLES FOR SHADOWS
I KNOW (FATHER)
(TOUCHING) IS WRONG
I DID NOT DO THAT (FATHER)
SHADOWS ARE SO WEAK
YES I KNOW YES
SOMEONE (TOUCHED)
YES
WHO?
MY (BROTHER) DID
YOUR (BROTHER) REACHED INTO THE SHADOWS?
YES
BUT WHY WOULD HE?
*
(LOOK) AT ME (SON)
I AM (LOOKING)
WHY WOULD YOUR LITTLE (BROTHER) REACH INTO THE SHADOWS?
I DO NOT KNOW WHY
YOU HAD NO ROLE IN THIS?
NONE
NOT EVEN AS A SUGGESTION OR PERHAPS A DARE
NEVER (FATHER)
*
MAYBE . . . MAYBE MY (BROTHER) WAS CURIOUS
CURIOUS?

WHEN YOU WERE YOUNG (FATHER) DID YOU (TASTE) THE SHADOWS?
 YOU ARE THE SUBJECT (SON) NOT ME
 AND DID YOU EVER (TOUCH) THEM?
 YOU ARE THE TOPIC (SON)
 AND MY (BROTHER)

WHO WAS COMPELLED TO DO WHAT ONE SO YOUNG SHOULD NOT BE
 ABLE TO IMAGINE DOING

YES MY (BROTHER) IS A LITTLE BRAT AND WE SHOULD BE ANGRY WITH
 MY (BROTHER) AND WHAT CAN WE DO (FATHER) TO TEACH THAT BRAT A
 GOOD LESSON?

Pretty To Think So

Cory was dreaming and then he was awake.

They were still driving fast. Dad was talking about a movie, or maybe it was a book. A man and woman loved each other, but there was a problem between them. The boy couldn't decipher the exact difficulty, but it sounded important and maybe painful, and a lot of things happened to those two people. But nothing changed about their lives. Then at the end of the book, the man and woman were riding together inside a car, and the woman said something about how good they could have been together, if only. Then the car made a turn and they slid together . . . and here Dad said that he wasn't sure about the particulars; he hadn't read the book since college . . . but he thought that was when the man said to the woman, "Well, it's certainly pretty to think so."

Dad started to laugh. It was a funny high sound, not like his normal laughs.

Mom looked back and saw her son, and she started trying to smile at him.

Then she looked up.

"Jim," she said, once and with a terrible voice.

Dad looked into the mirror and then over his shoulder, pushing hard at the brakes.

"Stay in the car," he said.

Mom asked, "What's happening? What am I seeing?"

"Stay here," Dad repeated, pushing open his door and going outside.

They weren't going anywhere. The world was very quiet and still, and Mom looked at Cory and then looked farther, gazing out the back window, a soft weak sound leaking out of her. Cory tried to turn around and look but couldn't. He punched the seat belt button while Mom climbed out of the car, grabbing Amy out of her baby seat and offering him a hand. "With me. Now."

They stood together at the back of the car, looking down the highway. Everybody had stopped, pulling onto the shoulder or staying in the middle of the road. Radio voices were talking about something coming, something fast. Yet Cory saw nothing but blackness where the stars should be, where the ground should be, all wrong-looking somehow and a little scary, but not too scary. He held Mom's hand and reached for Dad's, and Mom asked if this was the comet, and Dad knelt down and Mom did too, holding Amy close, and that's how they were when the light came, blazing and funny-colored and full of weird roaring noises.

After a long while, the noises began to make sense.

Eventually Cory learned how to see again.

First in his family, he gazed out at the new world, and with a voice that sounded very big and very mature, he said, "Look." To the cowering reborn entities beside him, he declared, "This is better even than I thought it would be!" O

JACKIE'S-BOY

Steven Popkes

In his last story for us, "Two Boys" (August 2009), Steven Popkes explored what slightly post-modern society would be like if Neanderthals were reintroduced. Now, from the viewpoint of yet another boy and a decidedly nonhuman intelligence, Steve picks up the pieces of a very different future.

Part 1

Michael fell in love with her the moment he saw her.

The Long Bottom Boys had taken over the gate of the Saint Louis Zoo from Nature Phil's gang. London Bob had killed in single combat, and eaten, Nature Phil. That, pretty much, constituted possession. The Keepers didn't mind as long as it stayed off the grounds. So the Boys waited outside to harvest anyone who came out or went in. They just had to wait. Somebody was always drawn to the sight of all that meat on the hoof, nothing protecting it from consumption save a hundred feet of empty air and invisible, lethal, automated weaponry. People went in just to look at it and drool.

Michael knew their plans. He'd been watching them furtively for a week, hiding in places no adult could go, leaving no traces they could see. The Boys had caught a woman a few days ago and a man last night. They were still passing the woman around. What was left of the man was turning on the spit over on Grand. He sniffed the air. A rank odor mixed with a smell like maple syrup. Corpse fungus at the fruiting body stage. Somewhere nearby there was a collection of mushrooms that yesterday had been the body of a human being. Michael wondered if it was someone who had spoiled before the Boys had got to them or if it was the last inedible remnants of the man on the spit. By morning there would be little more than a thin mound of soil to show where the meat had been.

This dark spring morning, just when the gates unlocked, one of the guards remained asleep. Michael held his backpack tightly to his chest so he made no sound. The man started in his sleep. For a moment, Michael thought he would have to take up one of the fallen bricks and kill the guard before he woke up. But the guard just turned over and Michael slipped furtively past him. He was just as happy. The only thing that got the Boys more riled than meat was revenge.

He stayed out of sight even past the gate. If the Boys knew he was here, they'd be ready at closing time when the Keepers pushed everyone outside. Michael had never been in the Zoo, but he was hoping a kid could find places to hide that an adult wouldn't fit. Inside the Zoo was safe; outside the Zoo wasn't. It was as simple as that.

Now, he was crouching in the bushes outside her paddock in the visitor's viewing area, hiding from any Keepers, looking for a place to hide.

She came outside, her great rounded ears and heavy circular feet, her wise eyes and long trunk. As she came down to the water, Michael held his breath and made himself as small as an eleven-year-old boy could be. Maybe she wouldn't see him.

Except for the elephant, Michael saw no one. The barn and paddock of one of the last of the animals was the worst place to hide. He'd be found immediately. *Everyone* had probably tried this. Even so, when the elephant wandered out of sight down the hill, Michael sprang over the fence and silently ran to the barn, his backpack bouncing and throwing him off balance, expecting bullets to turn him into mush.

Inside, he quickly looked around and saw above the concrete floor a loft filled with bales of hay. He climbed up the ladder and burrowed down. The hay poked through his shirt and pants and tickled his feet through the hole in his shoe. Carefully, through the backpack, he felt for his notebook. It was safe.

"I see you," came a woman's voice from below.

Michael froze. He held tight to his pack.

Something slapped the hay bale beside him and pulled it down. The ceiling light shone down on him.

It was the elephant.

"You're not going to hide up there," she said.

Michael leaned over the edge. "Did you talk?"

"Get out of my stall." She whipped her trunk up and grabbed him by the leg, dragging him off the edge.

"Hold it, Jackie." A voice from the wall.

Jackie held him over the ground. "You're slipping, Ralph. I should have found his corpse outside hanging on the fence." She brought the boy to her eyes and Michael knew she was thinking of smashing him to jelly on the concrete then and there.

"Don't," he whispered.

"We all make mistakes." The wall again.

"Should I toss him out or squish him? This is *your* job. Not mine."

"Let him down. Perhaps he'll be of use."

The moment stretched out. Michael stared at her. So scared he couldn't breathe. So excited the elephant was right there, up close and in front of him, he couldn't look away.

Slowly, reluctantly, she let him down. "Whatever."

A seven-foot metal construction project—a Zoo Keeper—came into the room from outside. Three metal arms with mounted cameras, each with their own gun barrel, followed both Jackie and Michael.

"Follow me." This time the voice came from the robot.

Michael stared at Jackie for a moment. She snorted contemptuously and turned to go back outside.

Michael slowly followed the Keeper, watching Jackie leave. "Elephants talk?"

"That one does," said the Keeper.

"Wow," he breathed.

"Open your backpack," the Keeper ordered.

Michael stared into the camera/gun barrel. He guessed it was too late to run. He opened the backpack and emptied it on the floor.

The Keeper separated the contents. "A loaf of bread. Two cans of tuna. A notebook. Several pens." The lens on the camera staring at him whirred and elongated toward him. "Yours? You read and write?"

"Yes."

"Take back your things. You may call me Ralph, as she does," said the Keeper as it led him into an office.

"Why aren't I dead?"

"I try not to slaughter children if I can help it. I have some limited leeway in interpreting my authority." The voice paused for a moment. "In the absence of a director, I'm in charge of the Zoo."

Michael nodded. He stared around the room. He was still in shock at seeing a real, live elephant. The talking seemed kind of extra.

The Keeper remained outside the office and the voice resumed speaking from the ceiling.

"Please sit down."

Michael sat down. "How come you still have lights? The only places still lit up are the Zoo and the Cathedral."

"I'm still able to negotiate with Union Electric. Not many places can guarantee fire safety."

Michael had no clue what the voice was talking about. "It's warm," he said tentatively.

"With light comes heat. Now, what is your name?"

"Michael. Michael Ripley."

"How old are you?"

Michael looked around the room. "Eleven, I think."

"You're not sure?"

Michael shook his head. "I'm pretty sure I was six when my parents died. Uncle Ned took me in. I stayed with him for five years. The Long Bottom Boys killed him a few months ago."

"You have no surviving relatives?"

Michael shrugged and didn't answer.

"Where do you live?"

Michael's attention snapped to the Keeper and he looked around the ceiling warily. "I just hang around the park."

"You have no place to stay?"

"No."

"Would you like to stay here?"

Michael looked around the room again. It was warm. There was clearly plenty to eat. None of the gangs were ever allowed inside. But where did they get the food for the animals? How come people weren't allowed in at night? Maybe he was on the menu here, too.

"I guess," he said slowly.

"Good. You're hired."

"What?"

"You will call me Ralph as I told you before. I will call you Michael except under specific circumstances when I will address you as 'Assistant Director.' Do you understand?"

Michael stared at the ceiling. "What am I supposed to do?"

Dear Mom,

I found a job. It is helping to take care of an eleefant. Her name is jakee. She is not very much fun but I like her anyway. Maybe she'll like me better when she gets to Know me. She is an eleefant!!! I don't think I ever saw an eleefant before. Just in the books you red to me.

I work in the zoo. I bet you never thawt I would ever work in a zoo. Most of the animals are gon. But there is the eleefant and a rino. No snaks.

It is a lot better than sleepng in the dumstrs. And a dumstr does not stop a rifle much. I miss you and DAD. But I don't miss uncle NeD all that much. I miss the apartment, though.

Love, Mike

He was mucking out her stall when Jackie entered.
She stopped and looked down at him.

"What are you doing?"

Michael straightened up. He tried to smile at her. "Working. Ralph hired me."
"To do that?"

Michael looked around. "I don't know. This seemed like it needed doing."

Jackie didn't speak for a moment. "Let the Keepers do that. Come with me."
He followed her to the door of the stall.

"We'll start with the first office on the left. You go in there and look for papers.
Books. Notes. Memos. Anything with writing on it. You know what writing is?"

"I know what writing is."

"Good."

Michael looked up at her. "How did you learn to talk?"

"That's not your business. Do your job."

It wasn't a small job. It seemed that the world of zoos ran on paper. Just pulling the folders out of the first office took three days. Michael's duties didn't end with bringing the papers out. The type was small enough he often had to hold it in front of first one of Jackie's eyes, then the other. It wasn't easy on Jackie, either. She had to stop regularly because of headaches. When he could, he tried to read them himself to see what Jackie was trying to find. She smacked him with her trunk if she caught him so he took extra time in the offices.

A cold rain descended on the Zoo. Ralph closed the doors and turned up the heat. Jackie was irritable at the best of times. Being inside only made her worse.

A month after Michael had come to the Zoo, when a late spring snow was sticking wetly to the ground outside, Jackie stared out the window resting her eyes from reading. Michael was sitting in front of the heater duct, eyes closed, luxuriating in the hot wind blowing over him. Jackie had been pushing him all morning but now she was fixing her gaze outside to ease her headache.

"So, kid, what's your story?"

Michael was instantly alert. "What do you mean?"

"Ralph told me you didn't have anybody outside. I know that much." Jackie turned her great head to look at him, and then stared outside again. "Where are your folks? Mom and Dad? Uncle and Aunt?"

"Mom and Dad died, like everybody else." Michael shrugged. There wasn't much to say about it. "Uncle Ned let me stay with him over near the Cathedral until he got caught by the Long Bottom Boys. I got away. I've been scrounging until now."

"Tough out there, is it?"

"I guess. It wasn't so bad with Ned. I took care of him. He took care of me."

Jackie looked at him. "What does *that* mean?"

"As long as I kept him happy, he gave me a place to live and fed me and protected me from anybody else." Michael considered Jackie thoughtfully. "I'm not sure what it takes to make an elephant happy."

"Just do your job," Jackie snapped at him. "That'll be enough."

She didn't speak for a moment. "Do you know how to get to the river from here?"

"Sure. But I wouldn't try it. The Boys have everything sewed up around the park. I sure found that out." He patted the duct and closed his eyes. "You have it nice here. Ralph keeps everybody out. You have food and heat. I sure wouldn't leave."

"I bet," Jackie said dryly. "Okay. Let's look at the lab books again."

Over the next week, Ralph often spoke with Jackie. Most of the time Jackie sent Michael outside. Having nothing better to do, Michael took to visiting the other animals.

There weren't many of them. Most of the exhibits were sealed and empty. The reptile house and the ape refuge were long abandoned. The bears were gone but some of the birds were still in the aviary and Michael stood for an hour in front of a single, lonely rhinoceros.

The rhino room became his favorite refuge. The rhino wasn't short with him. The rhino didn't ask him strange questions or snort with contempt when he tried to answer. The rhino didn't call him an idiot. The rhino didn't speak.

"Michael?" Ralph's voice came from the ceiling.

"Yes, Ralph."

"Jackie and I are finished for the moment. You can come back."

"Yeah." Michael didn't speak for a moment. "I do everything she asks."

"I know."

"I don't talk back. I clean up after her. And elephants make a lot of shit. Why does she treat me like it?"

"You're human. She has no love of humans. She needs you. That makes it worse."

"What did humans do to her?"

"She's the last of her herd. Humans brought her ancestors from India. Human scientists raised her and the others in these concrete stalls and gave her the power of speech. Then they let the rest of her herd die."

"How come?"

"The scientists didn't have much choice. They were already dead."

"A plague like what killed my folks?"

"Somewhat. From what you told me, your parents died from one of the neo-influenzas. The scientists died of contagious botulism."

"Where did all the plagues come from? How many are there?"

"Six hundred and seventy-two was the last count I received. But that was a few years ago and the data feed was getting unreliable toward the end. They came from different places. Some were natural. Some weren't. Several were home grown by people with an agenda: religious martyrdom, political revenge, economic policy disagreements, broken romances. Some started out natural and were then modified for similar reasons."

Michael mulled over what he understood. He didn't have Ralph to himself very often. Likely this chance wouldn't last long. "If she doesn't like people so much, why are we spending so much time going through all the lab books? Why doesn't she just leave?"

"That's not for me to say."

Dear Mom,

I thought elephants were nice. Jackie doesn't like anybody. Not even Ralf. Hes nice to me but Jackie says he has to be that way. He's a machine like the Keepers. Jackie said Ralf coodnt do what I am doing. It had to be a human beang.

But I still like her even if she doesnt like me. I like to watch her when shes eating. Its neat to watch her use her trunk, like a snake thaths also a hand. There are two knobs on the end of her trunk she uses like fingers. Only they are much stronger than fingers. She pinched me yesterday and today its still sore!

I moved my bed to the loft. That way its right over the heater and the hot air comes right up under me. Its like sleeping in warm water.

I miss you and Dad. If you can see us from up there in heavun, try to make Jackie not get mad all the time.

Love, Mike

"Where did you find this?" Jackie pinned him against the wall. She held up a green lab book in her trunk.

Michael tried to push her away but it was like trying to move a mountain. "I'm not sure."

"Where?"

Michael stopped struggling. "If you don't like what I'm doing, then do it yourself."

"That's your job."

"Then, back off!"

A moment passed. Jackie eased backwards. She handed him the lab book.

"Here's the date range," she said pointing to the numbers on the page with her trunk. "See? Month, slash, day, slash, year. Here's the volume number. This is volume six. I need volume seven for the same date."

"What's it going to tell you?"

Jackie raised her trunk and for a moment it looked like she was going to strike him. Michael stared at her.

Slowly, she lowered her trunk. "I'm not sure yet."

"Say thank you."

Jackie went completely still. "What did you say?"

"I said, say thank you." Michael's fists were clenched.

Jackie seemed to relax. She made a sound like a chuckle. "Get the lab book and I'll thank you."

"Fair enough," he said shortly.

Back in the offices, he stood in the hall and let his breath out slowly. His hands were shaking.

"Good for you, Michael," Ralph said from overhead.

"Yeah. Now I've got to find the lab book she wants."

"In the corner of each room is a camera," said Ralph. "If you can hold up the papers, I can help."

An hour later, he walked back into Jackie's stall and solemnly held out the lab book to her.

"Thank you," Jackie said in a neutral tone. "Hold it up to my eye."

"Okay."

Michael nodded.

Reading the lab book didn't take long.

"That's enough," Jackie said.

"What do you want me to do with it?"

"I don't care. I'm going outside."

Jackie turned and left the stall. Michael was surprised. It was cold out there and snow still remained on the ground from the night before.

He opened the lab book and went over the pages. There were few words but several figures and dates. It didn't mean anything to him.

"What's going on, Ralph?" Michael shivered and looked up at the gray sky. Spring was sure a long time coming. Ralph had told him this was April.

"I'm not sure," Ralph said. "Maybe she found what she was looking for."

Michael woke in the middle of the night. Sleepily, he looked over the edge of the loft. A Keeper was helping Jackie put something over her back.

"I don't think I can do it," Ralph said.

"Quiet. You'll wake him. Maybe you can toss it over my neck and tie the ropes underneath."

Michael sat on the edge of the loft and watched them a moment.

"You're leaving," he said after a moment.

"You're supposed to be asleep." Jackie tossed her trunk irritably.

Michael didn't say anything. He climbed down to the apron and walked over to them. The Keeper was trying to pull some kind of harness over her neck and back.

"Give me a knee up," Michael said. "I can help."

"No human will ever be on my back!" snarled Jackie.

"Suit yourself," Michael said. "But the only way you're going to be able to tie that harness is if you can center it on your back first and Ralph can't do it. I can if I can get on your back."

The Keeper extended his arm. "Here," said Ralph.

Michael stood on the camera and the Keeper extended it until Michael could jump to Jackie's neck. He grabbed the base of her ear and pulled himself up.

"That stings," she said.

"Sorry."

In a few moments, he had the harness in place. Then he dropped to the floor and pulled it tight.

"Good job, Michael," said Ralph.

Jackie shook herself and shifted her shoulders and back. "It's tight. I'm ready."

Michael looked first at the Keeper, then at Jackie. "Are you closing the Zoo?"

"Not immediately," said Ralph. "The food trucks have been coming in sporadically. I still have contacts with the farm and the warehouse. I've spoken with power and water. They say they are well defended but if somebody digs up a cable or blows up the pipes . . ." Ralph paused a moment. "My worst scenario is a year. My best scenario is five years."

Michael felt suddenly lost. He looked up at Jackie.

"Take me with you."

"What?" Jackie snorted. "No way."

"Come on," Michael pleaded. "Look, to everybody out there, all you are is steak on a stroll. I can get you out of the city. Tell me where you want to go."

"I—"

"She's going south," Ralph said smoothly. "She needs to follow the river south to the I-255 Bridge and then south to Tennessee."

"Where's I-255?"

"Oakville."

Michael thought for a moment. "That's not going to work. It'll be dicey enough to get past the Long Bottom Boys around the park. But the Rank Bastards live that way and they have an old armory. Even the Boys are scared of them."

"What do you suggest?" asked Ralph.

"Don't ask him." Jackie stamped her foot. "I can make it on my own."

Michael stood next to her. He looked at the ground. "I'm a kid. I don't have a gun. I'm not even very big. I can't hurt you."

Jackie looked away.

Michael nodded. "Well, once you're out of the park you can't go south. That's the Green Belt—sharpshooters. They don't ask questions. You just fall down dead about two miles away. You can't go north through the Farm Country. They don't have sharpshooters but they burned everything to the ground for six miles around them so you can't hide. That means west or east. Gangs in both directions just like the Long Bottom Boys or worse. I'd take the old highway right into town to the bridge and take it across. There's no boss around the bridge; there's nothing there anybody wants. The road is high off the ground so you can't be seen. If you're quiet and quick, you can get through before anybody knows. Then, I'd stay on the highway all the way down. People stick to the farms to protect them. The highways don't have anything."

There are no gangs below Cahokia nor many people either. Prairie Plagues got them. South of Cahokia, I don't know anything."

"How do you know all this?" Jackie snarled.

Michael stared at her. "If you don't know where things are somebody's going to have you for lunch. Uncle Ned taught me that and I'm still alive, aren't I?"

Jackie tossed her head and didn't reply.

"Jackie?" asked Ralph. "The idea has merit."

Jackie didn't speak for a long time. She stared out the door of the stall. Then she turned her head back to him. "Okay," she asked reluctantly.

"When do we leave?" Michael turned to the Keeper.

Jackie slapped the back of his head. "Right now. Get aboard."

Michael rubbed his head. "That hurt," he said as he climbed up on her back.

She rumbled out of the light.

"Good luck!" called Ralph after them.

"Wait!" Michael turned and called back. "What's going to happen to the rhino?"

He couldn't hear the reply.

They didn't say anything as Jackie walked slowly down behind the reptile house. Her ears were spread out and listening. The gate swung open at a brush of her trunk. Michael was impressed. A secret entrance.

"Check it out."

Michael slipped to the ground and peered through the bushes. No Boys. He signaled and she followed him, pushing aside the branches. She knelt down and he climbed back up. They listened. Nothing. She started walking up the hill.

Jackie was quieter than he'd imagined. She walked with only a soft, deep padding sound.

She stopped at the edge of the road. "Where to?" she asked in a low rumble.

Michael leaned next to her ear and whispered as quietly as he could. "Don't talk. I'll tell you where to go. Go to the right down the road. Then, when you go over the bridge, walk down to your left. That's where the highway is."

Jackie nodded abruptly and he could tell she wasn't pleased that he should tell her to be quiet but she didn't say anything. He figured he'd get an earful if they made it down below the river.

Michael looked around and listened. It was in the middle of the night. He couldn't smell a fire. Sometimes the Boys built a fire with the contents of one of the old houses. They drank whatever hooch they could find—raiding other gangs if necessary—and fired guns into the air and shouted at the moon until dawn. That would have been ideal. If Michael and Jackie were seen by the party, they would be seen by drunks.

No fire meant one of two things. Either there was no one around here or they were out hunting. A bunch of hungry, desperate, *sober* Long Bottom Boys was about the worst news Michael could think of. There was no hint of sweetness in the air—no mushroom festooned corpses indicating the site of a battle. That was good. The Long Bottom Boys were big on ceremonial mourning and they killed anyone they found. There weren't many left in Saint Louis but not so few that the Boys couldn't find someone to kill and then ritually stand over while the mushrooms returned the corpse to the earth.

Michael sweated every foot of the walk to the highway. But the night remained silent.

The highway here was level with the ground, but after a mile or two it rose to a grand promenade looking down on the ruins of the city. Michael whispered to Jackie that now was the time to run (*quietly!*) if she could.

Jackie didn't reply. Instead, she lengthened her stride until he had to grab on to

her ears to stay on her neck. He looked down and saw the riotous dark of her legs moving on the pavement.

There was a shot behind them in the direction of the park. Jackie stopped and turned around. They saw a flash and a dull boom. Then, gradually like the sunrise, the glow of an increasing fire.

Oh, Michael thought hollowly as he stared at the tips of the flames showing over the trees. That's what was going to happen to the rhino.

"Come on," he urged. "People are going to wake up. We need to get near the river before they start looking away from the park."

The road curved around the south of downtown and then north to reach the river bridges. They could not see the river below them as they crossed but they heard the hiss and rush of the water, the low grunt of the bridge as it eased itself against the flow, the cracks and booms as floating debris struck the pilings.

Then they were over it and traveling south, the flat farmland on their left, the river bluffs on their right, the road determinedly south toward Cahokia.

Dear Mom,

We reached Cahokia a little before daylite. We could tell we got there by the sign on the highway. I wasnt tired at all. But Jackee was. It must have been hard work walking all that way. Heres something intristing. Eleefants cant run. Jackee told me. They can walk relly fast but they are to big to run.

Jackee still doesnt like me much. She doesnt talk to me unless its to get help figuring out where we are. Mostly she can figur it out. But she needs my hands. I figur one of these days shell leave while I am asleep. So I sav things when I can.

She says we're going to Tenesee. Howald, Tenesee. There used to be eleefants there. She says she thinks they might be still there. If she doesn't find them there, she's going to try to get to Florida. It's warm all the time down there. There's lots of food to eat and it's never winter. That sounds pretty good to me.

I would like to stay with her. She is big and pretty and reel strong. She doesnt talk to me very nice. I dont think she would protek me like Ned did.

I will writ agin tomoro.

love, mike

Michael was surprised that they saw no people in Cahokia. The farmlands he had been thinking of were bounded by weeds but, other than that, looked as if cultivated by invisible hands. They saw no one. The only sounds were the spring birds, the river and the wind. Every few steps they could see a little mound of soil. The mushrooms had all dried up and blown away but these mounds still marked where someone had died.

That first day, when they made camp in a hidden clearing, Michael discovered that Ralph had planned for him to accompany Jackie all along. There was a tent, sleeping bag and all manner of tools: a tiny shovel, a knife, a small bow and arrow, the smallest and most precious fishing set Michael had ever seen. In a flap cunningly designed to be hidden, he found a pistol that fit his hand perfectly. Next to it, separated into stock, barrel, and laser sight, was a high-powered rifle. A second flap had ammunition for both, exploding and impact bullets in clearly marked containers. Michael stared at them. He suddenly realized he could take down an elephant with this weapon. Ralph must have known that. The implied trust shook him.

"What did you find?"

Michael realized she hadn't seen the guns. The pistol was no threat. He pulled it out and showed it to her.

"Do you know how to use it?"

"Yes." He replaced the pistol. Next to the weapons were Jackie's vitamin supplements along with finely labeled medicines and administration devices that only a human being could use.

Jackie snorted when she saw it all laid out.

Michael looked at everything, sorted and arrayed in front of him, for a long time. He wondered how long they'd be able to keep such treasures as this. He realized he might need the rifle.

Occasionally between long stretches of young woods and tall fresh meadows, they saw a few manicured fields that were laid out so ruler straight that the two of them stopped and stared. These, Jackie told him, must be tilled by machines. No human or animal would ever pay such obsessive attention to details. But no machines could be seen, and even these meticulous rows of corn or soybeans were frayed at the edges into weeds and brambles.

Even so, as tempting as a field of new corn was to Jackie, she was unwilling to chance it. Machines were chancy things, she said, with triggers and idiosyncrasies. Even negotiating with Ralph had been difficult when it went against his programming. Better to wait until they found an overgrown field down the road.

Jackie had no trouble finding food. It had been a wet spring and now that the sun had come out, the older and uncultivated fields sprouted volunteer squash and greens.

They fell into a routine. In the evening, they agreed on a likely spot and Michael took the harness off of her and set up camp. Michael was afraid she might step on him while she slept, so Jackie slept off a little ways from Michael's tent.

At first light, Jackie went off to find her day's sustenance. Michael made himself breakfast out of the stores Ralph had left him. He tried his hand at fishing in the tributary rivers of the Mississippi and gradually learned enough to catch enough for a good meal. He tried to eat as much as he could in the morning. It was likely they wouldn't stop until nightfall.

After he had eaten and before Jackie returned, he waited, wondering if she would come back.

She always did. She eased herself down the bank and drank, knee deep in the river.

Jackie was always impatient to get started and stamped her feet as Michael repacked the harness. Then she made a knee for him and he climbed aboard.

Always they went south. Always as quickly as Jackie could. Hohenwald first, since that was where the elephant sanctuary had been. But continuing south after that, if she didn't find them. South, she told him, was warm in the winter. South had food all year round.

Michael was amenable. He felt pretty safe. He was well fed. He'd learned the trick of riding Jackie and enjoyed watching the river on the right slip smoothly ahead of them and the land on the left buckle and roll up into bluffs and hills.

Spring turned warm and gentle. Michael felt happier than he could remember, up until they reached the spot where the Ohio poured into the Mississippi and the bridge was gone.

They stood on the ramp of Interstate 57 looking down at the wreckage. The near side of where the bridge had been was completely dry. Stained pilings that had clearly been underwater at one point rested comfortably in a grassy field. On the far side, the remains of the bridge had broken off a high bluff as if the whole southern bank of

the river had slid downhill. The river narrowed here, to speed up and pour into the slower moving Mississippi. Huge waves burst into the air as the rivers fought one another. They were over a mile away from the battle, but even from here they could hear the roar.

"The earthquake, maybe?" muttered Jackie.

"Earthquake?"

"About eight years ago the New Madrid fault caused a big quake down here. Ralph told me about it. The scientists had expected it to hit St. Louis as well but the effects were to the east so we were spared." Jackie shook her great head and swayed from one side to another. "How are we going to get across now?"

Michael looked at the old atlas. "There's a dam upstream near Grand Chain Landing."

"Look at the bridge!" Jackie trumpeted and pointed with her trunk. "It's just a sample. Look at the river. The dam is probably gone, too."

Michael looked upstream. "We'll find something. We just can't go south for a little while."

Jackie just snorted. After a moment, she turned slowly toward the east.

Dear Mom,

So far we still haven't been able to cross the OHIO river. I think it was even bigger than the Mississipi. Even at night, we can hear it rushing by. Every now and then, something floats by. Today I saw six trees, a trailer and an old house float by. Jackie says it's because of the flood upstream.

I can tell something is bothering jackie. She hasn't been as mean lately. It's not just that we aren't moving south. It is something more.

Love, Mike

As Jackie predicted, the dam was gone. Perhaps the Ohio, powered by spring rains, had ripped apart the turbines and concrete. The ground trembled as the water poured over the remaining rubble.

"Now what?" Jackie said in a soft rumble.

"Could you swim across?" Michael asked doubtfully. "Can't elephants swim?"

"Look at the water," Jackie said shrilly. "No one can swim through that."

"Then *not* here. How about where the water doesn't run so fast?"

Jackie didn't answer.

Michael stared at the map closely.

"There used to be a ferry in Metropolis. Maybe we could get a boat."

"A *ferry*?" Jackie turned her head and looked at him out of the corner of her eye. "I weigh in at six tons."

Michael nodded. "A big ferry, then. Couldn't hurt to look. It's just a few miles up the road."

"A *ferry*," Jackie muttered. "A *ferry*."

The center of Metropolis clustered around a bend in Highway 45. Jackie and Michael followed the signs down to the docks. The shadow of the broken Interstate 24 Bridge fell across the road and in the distance they could see the disconnected ends of the lesser Highway 45 bridge.

A great half sunken coal barge rested against the dock on the right side. The surface of the water was punctured by the rusting remains of antennas poking up from drowned powerboats on the left. Between them nestled the ferry *Encantante*, incongruously upright and unmangled. A man sat on the deck, whittling. He looked up as they came down the hill.

"Don't believe I've ever seen an elephant down this way before," he said as he stood up. "What can I do for you?" He was a tall, thin man. Michael couldn't tell exactly how old he was. His hair was turning gray but his face seemed smooth and unwrinkled. Thirty, thought Michael. Doesn't people's hair turn gray when they are thirty? The man was dressed in a red and black plaid jacket against the cool river air.

Michael spoke up before Jackie could respond. He hoped she would remain silent. He was pretty sure talking elephants would be suspicious.

"We need to get across."

"Do you, now?" He tapped out his pipe against the side of the ferry and refilled it carefully. "My name's Gerry. Gerry Myers. You are?"

"Michael Ripley. This is Jackie."

Gerry nodded. "All right then." He looked at the elephant. "I've never put an elephant on my boat. But it can't weigh much more than four or five of those little cars so it would probably be okay. He won't jump or move about?"

"Jackie's a girl." Michael looked at the water rippling along.

Gerry followed his gaze. "Yeah. 'She,' then. She won't move around? Be a damned shame if she turned over the boat and killed us all."

"She won't."

"Good. Well, then. Since you are the only human being I've seen in some months," Gerry said dryly, "and since I've buried everybody else, I'm inclined to think about your proposal." Gerry looked at him closely. "You're not sick, are you?"

Michael shrugged. "I feel pretty good."

"Doesn't mean much, does it?"

Michael shook his head.

Gerry stared out over the river and sighed. "Yeah. The last good citizen of the Metropolis that had lunch with me said he hadn't felt this good in months. I went looking for him when he didn't show up for dinner. He was dead sitting in his kitchen with a smile on his face. Only thing I can say is apparently he died so suddenly he forgot to feel bad about it."

Gerry lit his pipe and puffed at it for a moment. "Speaking of lunch, I'm a bit hungry. Care to eat with me?"

Michael hesitated.

Gerry pointed at the bluff up the hill from them. "On the other side of that is an old soybean field. Lots of good leafy growth for Jackie. Maybe you could turn her loose and eat with me."

"I don't know." Gerry didn't look like somebody that would kill him and roast Jackie. Uncle Ned had known who to trust—until the day he didn't, Michael corrected himself. How could you tell? Michael had a sneaking suspicion he would have to pay for the ride one way or another.

"Well, the field's there. Suit yourself. I'll be eating lunch in half an hour or so. In that warehouse looking building over there. Come by if you want to."

Michael nodded. Jackie turned and started up the hill.

The field was as advertised and there were no visible people around to take advantage of them.

"I'll eat here. You watch," said Jackie.

"I'd just as soon go on and have lunch with the old man," Michael said as he unharnessed her. "We still have to cross the river. Seems like we ought to know something about the other side."

"I don't trust him."

"You don't trust anybody." Michael rummaged through the packs until he found the pistol. "I got this."

"You be careful, then," Jackie said. "I'll be coming down there if you try to run off."

"Yeah. I like you, too." Michael hefted the pistol. It was heavier than it looked. He made sure it was loaded and checked the action.

Jackie watched him. "Where did you learn to handle a gun?"

"Uncle Ned taught me," Michael said shortly. "I kept guard when he foraged."

"Then . . ." Jackie stopped for a moment. "If you had the gun, why didn't you leave him?"

"It took both of us to stay alive," Michael released the chamber and made sure the safety was on. He put the gun in his pocket. "He was a lot bigger than I was. He protected me. I helped him. Staying with him made a lot of sense."

"But he—" Jackie shook her head.

"When the Boys found us he sent me off and took them on by himself."

Jackie was silent a moment. "So you wanted to leave with me because I'm a lot bigger than you are. I can protect you. Staying with me makes a lot of sense."

Michael stared at her. "Are you kidding? I'm traveling with six tons of fresh meat. What part of that makes sense to you?"

"Then why did you come with me?"

Michael stood up and didn't answer. He trotted down the hill toward the landing. Jackie stared after him.

Gerry was cooking in an apartment above the warehouse. The room had a nautical feel to it. Every piece of furniture had been carefully placed. The curtains over the window were a red and white check. The table was an austere gray, with metal legs and a top made of some kind of plastic. The countertops looked similar.

Two plates had been set out. The fork on the left, knife and spoon on the right, napkin folded just so on the plate. Plastic water glasses were set at precisely the same angle for each place setting.

Michael stood in the doorway, not sure what to do. Coming into the room felt like breaking something.

"Come on in," said Gerry. He was stirring a pot. The contents bubbled and smelled deliciously meaty. "Channel catfish bouillabaisse." He ladled out two full bowls and handed one to Michael. "Been simmering since this morning. Have a seat."

They sat across the table and in a few moments, Michael forgot Gerry was even there. He only remembered where he was when the bowl was half empty. Michael looked up.

Gerry was watching him with a smile on his face. "Good to see someone enjoy my cooking. Want some bread? Baked it yesterday."

Michael broke off a piece. Next to the bread was a small plate with butter. For a long minute, Michael stared, unable to recognize it. Then he remembered and smeared the bread across it.

"Whoa there. Use the knife."

Michael shrugged, pulled out his small hunting knife and smeared the butter across the bread.

Gerry raised his eyebrows and chuckled. "Fair enough. But next time use the little knife next to the butter."

Michael sopped up the rest of the soup with the bread and leaned back in his chair, stuffed and happy.

Gerry picked up the bowls and put them in the sink. "Come on down to the porch."

Michael followed him outside and down the stairs to a part of the dock that jutted over the water. Under an awning, he sat down in a lawn chair while Gerry pulled a box out of the river and opened it. He pulled out two bottles. He gave Michael the root beer and kept a regular beer for himself.

Michael sat back in the chair and savored the sharp, creamy flavor.

Gerry said nothing and the two of them watched the river roll by.

"So," Gerry said at last. "What's waiting for you on the other side of the river?"

"Hohenwald, Tennessee," Michael said and sipped his root beer. He could get used to this. "Then, maybe Florida."

"What's in Hohenwald?"

"An elephant sanctuary. Elephants don't like to be alone."

Gerry nodded. "I thought Florida was underwater."

"A lot of it is. But Jackie says the upper part of Florida is still there." Michael stopped.

"I see," said Gerry. He was silent a moment. "You're an awful nice boy to be crazy."

Michael didn't say anything. If Gerry wanted to think he was crazy that was all right with him.

"You don't think you'll find anybody down there, do you?" asked Gerry.

Michael shrugged. "How would I know?"

Gerry nodded. "Everything's pretty much fallen apart. I think there might be five people left alive here in Metropolis. You'd think we'd hang together. But it didn't seem to work out that way. There might be a few hundred out in the countryside. Seems like I spent the last five years burying everyone I've ever known. I can't believe it's much better down south."

Michael finished his root beer and put it on the deck. "That's where Jackie has to go. She has to have something she can eat in the winter."

Michael looked up at the remains of the bridge. He had only really known Saint Louis. It looked like things were messed up everywhere. For the first time he had an inkling what that meant.

"What was it like before?" Michael muttered.

Michael had been talking to himself, but even so, Gerry reacted. His face seemed to take on a rubbery texture. "Everything just came apart. First, the weather went to shit. Then came plagues, one after another. And not just people. Birds. Cattle. Sheep. Wheat. Beans. There was about six years where you couldn't get a tomato unless you grew it yourself. Even then, it wasn't much better than fifty-fifty. Oaks. Sequoias. Shrimp. Government would figure out how to make tomatoes grow again and every maple in the county would fall over and rot. They'd get a handle on that and the next thing you know somebody had engineered a virus that lived in milk. Why would anyone ever do that?" He shook his head. "Figured that one out after a couple of million kids. Right after that, the corn began to wither. We got a strain of corn that would grow and a tidal wave comes roaring over the East Coast. Boston, Providence, and New York go under water."

He stopped and sat up. He pulled out his bandanna and wiped his eyes. "If I believed in God, I'd go out and kill a calf on a rock or something. We sure as hell pissed him off." Gerry sighed. "Ah, musn't grumble." He sipped his beer, composed again.

Michael stared at him. Maybe Gerry did this all the time. "So," began Michael after a long and awkward silence. "We should cross here?"

"That's true. I'm pretty much the only game in town. But that's not my point." He pointed over the river at the opposite shore. "That's Kentucky. Or what's left of it. Things have been falling apart for a long, long time. I was sitting on my boat twenty years ago when the big rush came down the river that took out the two bridges. I could see it coming, a fifteen-foot wall of trash and debris rolling down on top of us. I had just enough time to pull *Encantante* into the creek downstream behind the oak bluffs when it washed over Metropolis and scoured everything between us and Cairo. Back then we still had people living here, so we were able to clean up and rebuild over a couple of years." Gerry chuckled. "My little ferry business picked up be-

cause nobody was going to rebuild the bridges—we were still in a *crisis* at that point. It hadn't become a *disaster* yet. Not enough people had died."

"Where did the water come from?"

Gerry shook his head. "Never really figured that out. Was it just the Smithland Dam that let go? Or did one big flood start way up the river and then take out all the dams one by one on the way down? I do know that flood is what took out the two dams downstream from here and when I did go up to look at Smithland, there wasn't much left of it. I came back. Then, about six years later, I loaded up a boat I had with all the fuel I could find and went up nearly five hundred miles to see what the hell was going on. It's not like you could trust anything you heard on the radio. I only knew what had happened here. I didn't turn around until I reached Cincinnati. There wasn't a bridge or a dam left standing the whole way. This was before the earthquake. Maybe somebody blew them up. It was a big mystery until other things sort of overshadowed it. But you let me wander away from my point again."

"Hey, it wasn't my fault."

"My point is that now the only thing that keeps what's on the Kentucky shore from coming over onto this shore is that river."

Michael shook his head. "So? What's over there that's not over here?"

Gerry shrugged. "Things. Big lizards, sometimes. Maybe a crocodile or two. Big animals—I haven't seen any elephants. But I might have seen a tiger."

"Yeah, right." Michael snorted. "Pull the other one. A mountain lion, maybe."

Gerry shrugged again. "When we put dams and bridges across the water, cars and buses weren't the only things that crossed. Now the dams and bridges are gone and what lives on the other side stays on the other side. It's not going to be as easy to get over here as it was before."

"We crossed the bridge in Saint Louis. It was just fine."

Gerry pulled his pipe out of his pocket along with his pocket knife and began cleaning the bowl. "Maybe things can't cross up that far north. Maybe the Mississippi keeps things from crossing west just like the Ohio keeps things from crossing north. Maybe I'm just having old man hallucinations. But I know what I saw. There are things that live on *that* side of the river I don't see on *this* side. You cross the river and they're sure as hell going to see *you*."

Michael didn't look at him. "That's where she has to go. She just can't get food up here in the winter."

"What did you do in Saint Louis?"

"The Zoo kept us alive. But it's gone now."

Gerry sighed. "She's a pretty animal. I guess there's no animal on earth so noble and beautiful, and just plain *big*, as an elephant. But it doesn't belong here. Jackie should be in India."

"I can't take her to India."

"I know that." Gerry hesitated. "Maybe it's time to cut her loose."

Michael stared at the decking. He didn't know what to say.

Gerry pointed across the river. "Tell you what. You and I take her across the river and let her off the boat. Maybe she'll work her way south. You come back here with me."

Michael looked at him, trying to see if there was some hint of Uncle Ned in his face. He couldn't tell. Michael was in no particular hurry to repeat that arrangement. "I don't know."

Gerry finished tamping the tobacco in the bowl and lit his pipe. "You know that soybean field I sent you to up on the hill? It's a pretty field, isn't it? The soybeans are one of those perennial varieties popular about fifteen years ago. When I was a kid that was a toxic waste site with a lot of mercury and cadmium and toxic solvents.

Don't look at me that way. That was years ago. It's safe enough for her now. Anyway, you know how they reclaimed it?"

"No."

"It was pretty neat, actually. They took some engineered corn. Corn pushes its roots deep into the soil—as much as ten feet in some varieties. This corn pulled up the metals and concentrated them into the kernels of the ear. It discolored the kernels. Some were silver, some were bright blue."

"I don't understand."

"Anyway," continued Gerry. "Because of the metal concentration, the kernels were expected to be sterile. Most of them were. But coons attacked the field and ate some and got sick. So that was one problem they had. Crows pecked at the ears and got sick. That was another. Bits of the ears were dragged by various animals a ways away. Turned out some were fertile after all. They took root and started growing over data lines. The plant couldn't tell the difference between a heavy metal being cleaned up in a waste site or a similar heavy metal in a computer underground."

Michael stamped his feet. "What are you talking about?"

Gerry stared hard at him. "I don't know what's across the river. I'm saying it could be anything."

"What? Killer corn?"

Gerry snorted. "Of course not. But if people can rebuild corn and it escapes what else could they have done? Crocodiles to control Asian lung fish? Killer bees to control oak borers? I *know* what lives around here. I live with it every day. I *know* things are different across the river." Gerry calmed himself. "You take your elephant across the river if you want to. But you'll come back and stay here with me if you're smart."

Jackie was waiting for him in the afternoon shade. A vast section of the soybean field had been leveled and she looked well-fed for the first time in several days.

Michael looked around. "Tasty?"

Jackie looked at the field. "Pretty good."

Her belly even seemed a little swollen.

"How much longer until we get to Hohenwald?"

Jackie shook her head. "Couple of weeks, I hope."

"And Florida?"

"If we go to Florida, I expect we'll get there mid-summer."

Michael thought for a moment. "Do you know the date?"

"It's the first of May."

"May day," said Michael slowly. "That's six weeks."

Jackie looked at him with one eye. "So?"

"Could you get there faster if you weren't carrying me?"

"It wouldn't make any difference. I could only go faster if I didn't take the time to keep fed. But I can't afford to starve myself. Not now."

"How come?"

"Never mind."

"You're hiding something."

"So what? It doesn't concern you."

"Who the hell do you think you are?" shouted Michael, surprising them both.

Jackie stepped back. For a moment she stood, arrested, one leg raised ready in defense, three solidly on the ground.

"Are you going to squash me for shouting at you?" Michael shook his head in disgust. "I was better off with Ned."

Slowly, Jackie eased her leg down. She turned and silently walked over to the pond

in the middle of the soybean field. Michael watched as she pulled up water and splashed it over herself.

Dear Mom,

I don't think Jackee will ever like me. I guess I was fooling myself. She's an eleefant. She hates me because I'm a person and people did things to her and other eleefants.

Gerry wants me to stay here with him. He has a good thing here. Metropolis has a power sorse so he can stay warm for a long time. With everybody gone, the left over preserved food will be good for years. There are some wild crops here, too. Ned never had it so good.

Jackee doesn't need me. Most of the stuff Ralph packed was for me. I could rig a bag for her to carry around her neck for the stuff she has to have. That ought to be enough. And it's not like I'm holding stuff for her to read anymore. Whatever she found back at the Zoo must have been all she wanted. She hasn't been interested in anything but going south since.

When I told this to Jackee she didn't say anything for a while. Then, all she said was, Suit yourself.

So, I guess I'll be staying in Metropolis.

love, Mike

Gerry waited at the ferry while Michael walked with Jackie back up to the soybean field. Michael decided he didn't want Gerry to know about her. It felt safer to keep everything quiet. Jackie followed his lead silently.

Michael kept glancing at her as she ate, trying to see if she had any regrets he was staying here. Her elephantine face was inexpressive but her movements were short and abrupt. Could she be angry at him for staying? Or just impatient to be on her way?

When she was done, he slung the makeshift bag around her neck so she could reach it and led her back down to the dock. She stepped gingerly onto the metal floor of the ferry. There was plenty of room and even in the strong current, it only swayed slightly.

Gerry cast off without comment and angled the ferry upstream into the river. Michael felt the powerful motor bite into the current and the entire craft hummed. But he could not hear the motor itself, only the churning of the propeller.

Gerry caught his expression. "Quiet, isn't she? Electric motor."

He pulled up the hatch. Michael saw a roundish cube with the shaft coming out connected with thick cables to a cylindrical device.

"That's the motor," Gerry said pointing to the cube. "That's power storage." He pointed to the cylinder.

"A battery?"

"They called it a fuel coil when I bought the boat. Not sure how it works but it holds about forty hours of power. These days I charge it up from a little turbine I dropped off the dock. Don't need to use the boat that much. For longer trips I can charge it from a big fuel cell I can carry with me." He dropped the hatch with a clang and returned to the wheel.

The *Encantante* passed the main eddy line and entered the center of the river. Gerry stepped up the motor and angled the *Encantante* more steeply. The ripples and twists in the current caused the boat to shift and slide a little. Not enough to make standing difficult but enough so Michael noticed. It made him grin. Jackie looked around nervously.

Then, they were across the main river and nearing the far side. Gerry eased off the throttle and dropped the *Encantante* below a bluff jutting out into the water. Again

they crossed a strong eddy that made the ferry jump a moment. The water grew calm and Gerry brought *Encantante* to the dock.

Michael led Jackie off the ferry and stood with her for a moment in the middle of the road. He looked east, judging the vegetation. There was plenty. The forest was thick on the other side of the road and he could see the break in the trees signifying a field. Jackie wouldn't starve.

Turning away from Gerry so he couldn't see, Michael pulled the atlas out of his jacket.

"Here. You walk down here to Interstate 24 and take it south. Then take Highway 45 to Benton. Once you get to Benton, hunt around until you find Highway 641. Take that to Interstate 40, east. Then—"

"You've been over this. A lot."

"Well, I wrote it down. There's a leather holder I made for you. It's tied to the belt and the directions are in it along with the map book. I drew it all out on the map so you wouldn't get lost."

"Thanks," said Jackie shortly.

Michael nodded and stuffed the atlas into the bag. "You take care of yourself."

Jackie watched him as he walked back to the ferry. Michael felt his eyes sting. He looked back.

Jackie was only a few feet away. Something shook the brush on the far side of the road. Before he fully registered what it was, he was running at it, yelling at Jackie to back away. Gerry tried to grab him but Michael ducked under his hands.

It raised its thick body high on its legs and ran toward Jackie, its mouth open and narrow as a snake's. *Lizard?* *Crocodile?* He ran past and stood, screaming, between them.

The thing stopped, closed its mouth and stepped back only so long for a long tongue to slip out and back. Then it lunged forward and grabbed for Michael. Michael danced back but it grabbed his leg and shook him off his feet, then raised its claws over him.

Michael heard trumpeting. Jackie's leg came down on its midsection. The creature ruptured and blood and meat spewed across the road. Its jaw opened reflexively and Michael scrambled back. Jackie stamped on it until it was nothing but a flat, smeared ruin. Then she looked at Michael.

Michael smiled at her. She leaned over him and wrapped her trunk around his leg. He looked down and saw the blood and felt nauseous.

"This will hurt," she said. She wrapped her trunk around his leg and squeezed. For a moment, Michael couldn't see or breathe.

"*Gerry!*" Jackie shouted. "*Get over here and pick him up!*"

Gerry ran over to them and as he lifted Michael by the shoulders, Jackie lifted his leg.

The pounding in his leg seemed to drown out everything.

Back in the ferry, Michael looked around. He must have blacked out a moment for they were now deep in the middle of the river. He felt sleepy.

"Don't you go away on me," said Jackie, kneeling next to him. "You stay here. *Michael—*"

Michael wanted to say he was sorry but he was as light as smoke and he drifted away.

Part 2

It was all light and dark for a long time. When things were lighter he slept in a brown haze as if he were swimming in honey. He was warm and safe. Occasionally, he was convulsed with pain. He couldn't tell where the pain was coming from exact-

ly. Sometimes it seemed to come from his neck. Other times, his leg. Sometimes he was riven by pain that seemed to come from nowhere.

This went on, it seemed, forever. Then, it grew lighter and he opened his eyes.

He was in a room, in a bed, that reminded him of when his parents still lived. The room had a window. As then the bed had been pushed against the wall so he could look out the window. It had sheets and a blanket. He fingered them gently, wondering if he was dreaming. Outside, the sun shone. His leg hurt.

He heard a grunt and Jackie's head appeared in the window. She pushed it open.

"How are you feeling?"

"Sleepy," Michael said. "My leg hurts."

"Go back to sleep if you want. I'll be here."

Michael nodded and smiled. Her trunk hovered in the air near him. He reached up and pulled it close, a warm and bristly comfort. He could feel the muscles tense a moment, then relax. The weight of it next to him, the grass smell of her breath, the beat of her pulse. Michael closed his eyes. He felt like he was floating in the air.

Gerry was sitting at the foot of the bed reading a book. The sunlight was gone and it looked threatening outside.

"An afternoon June storm," Gerry said, looking up from his book.

"June?" Michael shook his head. "It was May when we got to Metropolis."

Gerry nodded but didn't say anything.

"Well?"

"Wait until Jackie gets back. She wanted to be here when you woke up. I only got her to go up the hill and eat by promising to call her if you woke up."

Gerry returned to his book.

"Aren't you going to call her?"

Gerry shook his head. "It's hard enough to get her to leave you. She needs to eat her fill. Know what you're going to do?"

"What?"

"Pretend to be asleep so I don't get in trouble."

Michael closed his eyes obediently. Then he didn't need to pretend.

It was the thunder that woke him. He started and his leg began to throb. He could see the bulking shadow of Jackie with her head in the window. Gerry had rigged some kind of awning over the window so at least her head wouldn't get too wet. Michael didn't like it. That was his job.

Gerry entered the room with a hissing lantern. He set it on the side table and moved the curtains away.

"There, you see? Let there be light."

Michael tried to reach his leg but he was too weak. "Can you rub my leg? It really hurts."

Gerry looked down.

"Michael," Jackie rumbled gently. "You need to be brave."

Michael didn't like the sound of it. "Am I going to die?"

"No," said Jackie somberly. "The dragon bit your leg. We couldn't save it."

"What do you mean?"

"It got infected," said Gerry. "It got so bad we thought it was going to take you with it. So, it had to go."

"Go?" Michael shook his head. "What are you talking about?"

"Gerry had to cut off your leg," said Jackie.

"What?" Michael said weakly.

Gerry pulled back the blanket. Michael's thigh and knee looked bruised and purple. Below that was a fat bandage that ended long before his ankle.

"You cut off my leg." Michael couldn't believe the stump was his. "This is a joke. I can still feel my foot."

Gerry replaced the blanket. "After a while, your mind will accept there's no foot there. Then you won't feel it anymore." The shape of the blanket now clearly showed what was missing. "At least, that's what I've heard."

Michael stared at the blanket for a long time. Outside, the thunder receded and while the lightning played in the clouds, there was little sound but for the rain and the wind.

"You said dragon," Michael said, looking up from his leg. He couldn't stand to stare at it any more.

"Komodo dragon lizard," Gerry said. "Jackie figured out what it was as soon as she saw it."

Jackie looked up at the sky. She looked inside the window. "I expect there were several zoos and other facilities in Florida that collapsed just like the zoo in Saint Louis. Maybe that rhino is still alive. For the summer, at least. According to Gerry, these lizards have survived for a while. I'm not sure how a tropical species can make it through a temperate winter. Perhaps they move south when the temperature drops. Or perhaps they find a place they can sleep through the cold. I suppose it's possible there were enough of them that some were resistant to the cold. The ones less resistant died out and the remaining population bred. Evolution in action. Or maybe they were modified."

Michael stared at her. Jackie was talking to him. Really talking to him. She had never done that before.

Gerry interrupted gently. "How are you feeling, Michael?"

Michael started. He'd forgotten Gerry was there. "My foot hurts." He looked down at the blanket, oddly misshapen without his foot under it. Tears welled up. "What am I going to do?"

"Rest, for the moment," said Jackie. "Then figure it out."

Michael healed with all the combustive vitality of any well-fed young boy. By early July, the stitches were out and the skin over the stump was new and tender. He either hobbled about with a crutch that Gerry had made him or Jackie carried him.

But as the days wore on he started finding Jackie high on the broken end of the Interstate 24 Bridge carefully watching the other side.

"What's over there?" Michael asked as he sat down and dangled his leg over the hundred foot drop.

"You shouldn't sit so close to the edge," Jackie said quietly.

"If this bridge will hold you, it's going to hold me."

Jackie reached over and picked him up with her trunk. "Edges crumble."

She put him down and he leaned against the wall. "Okay. What's over there?"

"I've been watching the dragons." She pointed with her trunk. "They come to the road once around sunrise and once around sunset. In the morning, when they're warm enough, they leave the road and move to the forest at the edge of the clearing. At night, they slink away under the trees to sleep somewhere. A cave, maybe, or some other kind of den. If they're hungry, they stay near the clearing until they've made a kill. Animals avoid the road so it's not profitable to hunt there. That's why they hug the edges of the clearings. There." She pointed again across the river. "And there. See the carcass? It was a deer they took yesterday morning."

Michael saw one leg sticking up from the ground in the clearing. Two long motionless shadows were lying near it.

"So the road is safe in the middle of the day."

"Safer, anyway. This section of road has only two lanes. The wider roads might be better or worse. I can't tell from here. Gerry was right about one thing. They're not crossing the river."

Michael saw something moving. A large spotted cat. He pointed it out to Jackie.

"A leopard, maybe?" she said. "Look how it's avoiding where the dragons are."

"Look way in the distance in that clearing. Deer?"

"I don't know. They don't look like deer. Gazelles? Antelopes? Something the leopards and Komodos can eat, I suppose."

"Where did they come from?"

"Zoos in Florida? Laboratories in Atlanta? I don't know." She paused a long time. "Over there things are going to be different."

Michael leaned back against the ridge of her back. He rubbed the stump of his leg. It was still tender and it itched constantly. Sometimes, if he wasn't thinking about it, he tried to scratch his toes.

"The summer is getting on," Michael said. "We should get started."

"Yeah, right," Jackie snorted. "You want to lose both legs? You're staying here with Gerry. I'll go on down alone."

"You need me!"

"I'll cope. You were right. You belong here."

"That was before."

"Before what?"

Michael hesitated. "When I didn't think you liked me."

Jackie turned her head and looked at him. "What makes you think I like you now?"

"You stayed with me. Gerry said."

"I felt guilty for getting you into this."

Michael felt as if he were struck. Ned had never treated him this way. "Why? Why hate me? Why be so mean to me?" Michael felt like she was hiding something. How do you get someone to tell you what they don't want to? "Why did you leave the Zoo?" he asked suddenly.

"I didn't like humans. And I had to leave."

Michael picked up on the "didn't" immediately but kept it to himself. "Ralph said he had a couple of years yet. It didn't have to be right then."

"I had to leave."

"Why? Why then? Why—when we could be back there enjoying good food and not staring over the river at dragons."

Jackie shook her head.

Sudden rage shook Michael. "Damn it! I saved you. You owe me."

Jackie sighed. "This is hard for me. Did you know there were four of us? Tantor, Jill, Old Bill, and me. We all learned to speak quickly enough but we hid it from the Keepers as long as we could. We had no love of them. Why should we? Even if we hadn't had the wit to speak, we would have known this was not the place we should be."

"You saw the zoo. There were cameras everywhere. Where there are cameras, there can be no secrets. So we were found out. They taught us to read. They taught us anything they could get their monkey hands on. We talked it over among ourselves. Why not learn what they had to offer? What could it hurt? Learn the enemy, said Old Bill. But keep them distant."

Jackie fell silent for a moment. "Every animal is wired its own way. Herd animals and pack animals are similar in one respect. They define themselves by membership in the group. Once you include a new member in the group, you're bound to them. Wolves, cattle, and elephants are the same. We didn't want that. We didn't want to include humans in our tight little community. So we held back. We acted confused

and slow. We did everything we could to make ourselves look stupid. Smart enough to work with, but our true nature held secret."

"Then the humans started dying. One after another. In groups. By themselves. Until we were by ourselves. Only Ralph was left to care for us."

"We were ecstatic. All we had to do was figure out how to escape Ralph and survive. We knew we had to go south. Georgia. Florida. Alabama. Where there was no snow in the winter and we could eat."

"Then Jill died. A bit of wire or glass left in the hay, maybe. No veterinarians left, right? We never really knew, but she died bloated and screaming. That left Old Bill and Tantor. I don't know how it happened, but I woke up a few weeks later and they were fighting. It's a terrible thing to see two five-ton animals slamming into one another. They had come into *musth* at the same time. I don't know why. I think I came into heat watching them. Biology triumphant."

Jackie snorted. "If they had been dumb beasts, one of them would have figured out they were losing and broken it off. Instead, Old Bill killed Tantor. He came over and mounted me."

"But the battle hurt him, too. Inside, somehow. A concussion? Internal hemorrhaging? I'll never know. He just wasted away. Then he was dead and I was alone and pregnant. You appeared on the scene a week after that."

Michael stared at her. "I don't understand."

"I'm telling you why I had to leave. I didn't have a couple of years. The gestation period of an elephant is twenty-two months. No more. No less. I'm five months pregnant. I have to find a place that's safe, that's warm, where I can raise my child."

"Oh," Michael said. "But why the hurry? That's a couple of years."

"Not really. I don't know what's at Hohenwald. What if there are no elephants left? Then it's only me. A few months to find a place and get through the first winter—how will I know I've found a good spot until I've been through the winter? Then a few months to move to a new spot if I have to. Then a solid year of eating. That's not much time. Not much time at all."

Michael looked across the river. "Guess the dragons are a problem for a little guy."

"You think?" she chuckled.

"I didn't mean me," Michael said reasonably. "You're going to need me." He looked up at her and she looked away. "And you know it, too. Is it so terrible to need a human when you're so alone?" Michael looked over the edge of the bridge and spat. He could see it nearly all the way down. "Look at it this way. We used you when everybody was alive. Now's your chance to use us—or at least me."

"I don't want to use anybody."

"Then take me along because you like me. Take me along because you can use my monkey hands. Take me along because I don't weigh much and won't be a burden to carry. Only *take me along!*"

Jackie didn't say anything for a moment. "You're crippled."

"Compared to you, everyone is crippled."

"Michael, you're missing one leg."

"So?"

Jackie snorted. "You can't keep up."

"I couldn't keep up before."

"You're being difficult."

"Where did you ever get the idea I'd make leaving me behind *easy* for you?"

"*You're missing a leg!*" Jackie trumpeted in frustration. "I can't take you with me."

"Why not?"

"Why *not?*" Jackie shook her head. "You're missing a leg."

"You said that." Michael stared her straight in the eye. "Like I said: So?"

"Michael," she said helplessly.

"You owe me an answer. And don't give me the 'not keeping up' crap. You owe me better than that."

Jackie stared back at him. "Okay," she said slowly. "The truth is I don't want to have to take care of you."

"More crap."

"Not at all. I don't know what's going to happen when I meet other elephants. I can't have any more dependants than my own baby."

"Let's add some more truths here." Michael felt like he was going to cry. He wiped his eyes angrily. "So I can't walk without a crutch. I'm riding you anyway. Besides, when my stump heals, we can make an artificial leg. You read that yourself. Even Gerry said he could do it. We might even find one that will fit me. Just because there wasn't anything in the Metropolis Hospital doesn't say anything about other hospitals. So it's not my leg. It's not like I haven't been useful. You wouldn't have gotten out of Saint Louis without me. It's been me, with my human hands, who's been able to keep the stuff together. I'm the one who can use a gun. I'm the one that saved your life. The truth is you need me. Your baby needs me. So let me come along."

"I'll have to look out for you."

"We'll have to look out for each other. *You* didn't see the dragon. *I* did."

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't want anybody to die around me. Not again." she shuddered.

For a moment, Michael could read her as clearly as if she were a human being standing right in front of him: her face dark and sad, her eyes haunted. He reached up and took her trunk and draped it around his shoulder. He stroked it gently. "You're going to need all the help you can get. You've got a baby coming. You don't even know if the elephants are still there or if you can find them. You're going to need my hands and my eyes. Better take them with you."

"Why do you want to go with me so much?"

Michael laughed. "Are you kidding? Live on the back of an elephant? What kid wouldn't trade his teeth to be in my place?"

"That can't be the only reason."

"Oh, there are a million reasons for us to be together. I can't think of all of them for you." Michael hugged her trunk. He looked up at her. "I'm going to be an uncle!"

This time, Gerry kept the *Encantante* a hundred yards from shore while Michael and Jackie watched for signs of the dragons.

Michael scanned the forest with the binoculars Gerry had given him. "I don't see any."

"We saw the kill in the clearing this morning. They should be there," Jackie said.

"And they might have decided to stay in the shade today," Gerry commented dryly. "Why miss a chance at a mountain of meat?"

"Quiet," said Michael. "Let's not do this all over again."

Gerry opened his mouth, and then shut it. "Suit yourself. I'll say this for the last time. This is a mistake and you'll remember I said it."

"If things work out, we might come up in a year or two. You can meet Jackie's new baby."

Gerry didn't answer but emptied his pipe over the side.

"It's now or never." Michael patted Jackie's leg. "Help me up."

"I think Gerry's right."

"Not going to go through it again right this minute. Make a leg."

Jackie bent down on one knee and Michael clambered up. "Okay, then." He pulled out the rifle.

Jackie eyed it warily. "I didn't know you had that."

"Everybody has secrets. Let's roll."

Gerry brought the *Encantante* slowly to the pier. His own rifle was standing in the corner a foot away from him but he didn't look at it. Instead, he kept his hand over the throttle and the reverse switch.

Jackie stepped slowly onto the pier and looked around. Michael held the gun ready. "Okay, then."

Jackie began lumbering up the road.

Michael heard Gerry call after them: "Good luck!" Then the propeller revved up and the ferry pulled away from the pier.

They were on their own.

Michael looked around and watched carefully. The one that got his leg was dead but Michael wouldn't have minded giving him some company.

Part 3

Once the dragons had warmed themselves on the pavement, they moved to the shadows, waiting for whatever wandered close by. Michael didn't know if it was Jackie's size or the fact they stayed in the center of the road as far from the edge as possible, but the few dragons they saw only watched as they walked by. The *Encantante* containing two humans and an elephant must have confused them. Perhaps Michael had been the real target all along, or perhaps the dragon hadn't seen all of Jackie, just her leg, and attacked what it thought was a single animal. They would likely never know.

The infection that had nearly killed Michael showed the threat of the dragons was probably greater than Jackie being a target for every hungry man with a gun. Staying to the middle of the roads meant they traveled in the open. Jackie could be seen for a long distance. This made both of them nervous. Michael kept anticipating the feeling of Jackie sagging underneath him, the victim of a hungry sniper, followed by the inevitable sound of rifle fire.

They saw no one.

"Where is everybody?" Michael asked. Even in Saint Louis there had been some people—to be avoided, of course. But they had always been there.

"I don't know." Jackie watched the low farms. "This is different from what I had imagined."

The land rose. The forest grew thicker, lush and filled with tall oaks and maples. The road disappeared into rubble within a dark and gloomy forest floor nearly bare of vegetation. The remains of the road was a break of light between the trees.

"Keep watch," Jackie said after a while. "It'll be cold under the trees. The dragons will be sunning themselves wherever there's a warm spot."

But the forest grew thicker and even quieter. They saw no dragons.

"No people and no dragons." Michael leaned forward to look down on Jackie's face. "Any ideas?"

Jackie shook her great head. "It's too cool for them here under the trees. Maybe the dragons migrate north in the spring when the canopy is thinner. Then return south."

"Lizards migrating?"

"Who knows? It's a new world down here. I was modified. Maybe they were, too. Or maybe this just isn't dragon country."

"You were modified for a reason, I guess. Maybe they were, too."

Jackie was silent for a moment. "Why do you think I had to be modified for a reason?"

"Nobody would choose a five-ton experiment unless they had a reason." Michael cuffed the top of her head. "Especially one as foul tempered as you are."

"Yeah. Thanks." Jackie was silent for perhaps a dozen steps. "It was in the last notebooks you found."

"I figured."

"How so?"

"I bring you every notebook in the place. None of them satisfy you. Then, you find what you're after. The next day you leave. At first, I thought it might be something about Hohenwald. Something important you needed to know before you could leave. But the place is clearly on the map. And I couldn't see what would be in notebooks about *you* that would have anything to do with Hohenwald. Whatever you were looking for had to be about you. After a while I figured out it had to be something about you that only the people that created you would know. That's why you were searching the notebooks. And it had to be something Ralph either didn't know or couldn't tell you. Ralph would know all there was to know about *how* they had made you. But there's no particular reason I could think of that they would tell him *why*."

"It could have been genetic maps of the Hohenwald males."

"What's a genetic map?"

"Something you wouldn't know about." Jackie grabbed the leaves off a low hanging maple and pulled them down. The branch tapped Michael on the head.

"Ouch. What was that for?"

"For thinking you know everything about me."

"I *know* I don't know everything about you. For one thing, I don't know what was in those notebooks."

"The purpose of the project. My purpose."

Michael cried out with delight. "I was right," he crowed.

"You were right."

"What was it?"

"They were going to reseed elephants back into Africa and Asia. But the elephants were going to have to be as smart as humans to keep from being steak on the hoof."

"That's weird," Michael said. "Why couldn't somebody just go and watch out for them." Then it hit him. "Oh."

"'Oh,' is right," Jackie said gently.

"They knew they were dying. They must have known *everybody* was dying. There wouldn't be anybody to take care of you." Michael shook his head. "That doesn't make sense. Why go through all the trouble and die before they can make good on it?"

"I don't know. I didn't find any personal diaries or notes. I just found the original mission statement and long range plan."

"What do you think happened?"

"I think they made a mistake and died too quickly. Since we didn't trust them, they didn't really know how well they had succeeded. They kept trying to adapt, trying to figure out how smart we really were and how they were going to adapt their plan to our limitations. They were caught sick trying to do right by us."

Michael didn't say anything for a long time. "Do you think they figured it out before they all died?"

Jackie sighed, a deep rumbling breath. "God, I hope not."

Dear Mom,

My spelling is better since I let Jackie read the letters. She had been doing it sometimes but hadn't said anything.

I didn't tell you about Gerry. But he and Jackie took care of me

when I was sick. Gerry is a Real Good Guy, so if you get a chance, look out for him.

Jackie's job was to look out for the elephants. So, now when we get to Hohenwald, she gets to do her job. I'm not sure what I'm going to do. My job so far has been to be her hands. But most of what I do has to do with traveling. When she gets there, she won't be traveling anymore.

She said all of the elephants at Hohenwald were females. But the information she had was over ten years old. Ralph hadn't been able to contact Hohenwald for a long time. Maybe they weren't fire protected.

The land is different now, wilder. Jackie says it looks like the old forests from hundreds of years ago. But it's much too recent. She thinks somebody must have made it. So we're careful.

I miss you every day. You and Dad both, though I don't remember him so well. Jackie thinks I'm strange to write to you, being dead and all. I don't think it's strange at all. (So there, Jackie!)

If I talked to you out loud, people would just think I was crazy. This way, it's just between me and you and I get a chance to collect my thoughts. I think I remember you better, too, if I do this. Ned had some good ideas mixed with the bad.

Jackie makes sure I brush my teeth every night. She had me look for a toothbrush in Ralph's packs. Sure enough, there was one.

We're coming into Hohenwald soon. So, I'll tell you about it after that.

Love, Michael

They had been several days on old Highway 641 when Michael saw Interstate 40 through a break in the trees.

This part of the road had seen better days. The roads in Tennessee were better cared for than the ones in Illinois or Kentucky. It was one of the best ways to determine when they crossed state or county borders: the roads or the farms were cared for differently. In Kentucky, the roads were broken in places and worn away in others and they had to keep a sharp eye for dragons.

Once they crossed into Tennessee the roads looked as if they were cared for by someone with a mania for cleanliness and sharp borders. It reminded Michael of the mysterious farms up in Illinois. The dark forest seemed to be the province of Kentucky. The forest here seemed more normal: a mix of young trees and shrubs. Once or twice they saw the remains of a garden. There had been people around recently, if they weren't around right now. Still, they saw no one living. Just the occasional mound of mushrooms.

Jackie stopped dead in the middle of the roadway.

Michael almost fell off. He caught on to one of her ears and pulled himself back up to her neck. He looked around nervously to see what made her stop.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"I hear something."

"Dragons?"

"No."

Jackie spread her legs and leaned forward. She let her trunk down to rest on the ground.

"Is something wrong?" asked Michael.

"Shut up."

Michael leaned back and pulled out the map. It looked like they turned east here. Hohenwald was only seventy or eighty miles away.

Jackie straightened up.

"So?"

"Nothing."

"Right."

Jackie shook her head in irritation.

A few miles further on, Interstate 40 was more visible. They walked up the eastern ramp to the road proper. Michael felt better. The visibility from an interstate was much greater than from the little, forest enclosed roads. While they hadn't seen a dragon for a while, Michael didn't want to take any chances.

Jackie stopped on the interstate again and assumed the strange leaning posture.

"What is it?"

Jackie didn't answer. She just shook her head at him.

Michael climbed down to look around. He hopped over to the edge of the interstate, leaned against the guard rail. It was considerably more open to the south. Michael thought he could see a fairly large turtle of some sort, perhaps thirty pounds, walking along the edge of the forest. It looked like dragon country.

"We're going the wrong way," Jackie said suddenly.

Michael pulled out the map and studied again. "No. This is the way to Hohenwald."

"Where are we?"

Michael studied the map. "McIllwain. At least, that's the closest thing that looks like a town. That way—" he pointed east—"lays the Tennessee River. We go over it, if the bridge is still there. About thirty miles further on we turn south again to Hohenwald."

Jackie shifted nervously. "They're not there."

"The Hohenwald elephants?"

Jackie turned west. She leaned out again and laid her trunk on the ground. "Not that way, either."

"Nothing to the north of us, is there?"

Jackie turned east again, dropped her trunk to the ground. For a long time, she was motionless. Finally, she shook herself. "It's the river that's messing me up. I think they're south."

Michael sat on the guard rail. "Dragons might be down that way. Also, people."

"Maybe. I don't think they're far."

Michael sighed. He stood, leaning against the wall. Jackie made a leg for him and he climbed up. "The river is going north to south. Maybe we can keep going south on 69 and you can keep listening."

"How far is the river? Is there a road that follows it?"

Michael ran his finger along the blue line. "The river is angling toward us. It comes pretty close starting around Akins Chapel. We'll only be a few miles away from it when we get to Jeanette. Maybe ten miles."

"Let's go."

At Jeannette, they found Brodie's Landing Road. This brought them down to the river.

The Tennessee River was not the crushing roar of the Ohio or the Mississippi. It was broad and flat with a steady slow southern flow. On the other side, washing in the still water was a herd of elephants.

Jackie froze, staring at them. The air was still. The elephants across the river stared back. Michael didn't move. He wondered if the elephants could see him. Just how well did elephants see, anyway?

The moment stretched out long enough that Michael wanted to change his position. He began to itch.

Suddenly, one elephant in the water snorted and clambered up the bank. It trumpeted once and then walked up the bank. The other elephants followed her.

Jackie shook herself once they were out of sight. She walked into the water but the current, though slow, seemed to shift her slightly. She stopped and backed up. "Where can I get across?"

"We can go back north and across Interstate 40. Or, we can go south and cross Highway 412."

"Which is closer?"

"Both are about the same."

Jackie thought for a long time.

"South," she said at last. "We go south."

They crossed the river at Perryville. The bridge seemed intact, though, of course, they couldn't be sure. It cracked like a gunshot when they were in the middle and for a moment, Michael couldn't breathe. But the bridge gave them no more trouble and they were on the east side of the Tennessee River.

"We're quite a ways from Hohenwald," Michael said as they lumbered down the road.

"Did you think they would stay there? Their Keepers must be dead, too." Jackie sounded almost happy.

"Do you think Ralph is dead?"

She shook her head irritably. "I'm not concerned about the fate of one robot."

That's not your purpose, he thought. It made him nervous.

Along the eastern side of the river, they found a flat, worn trail, well marked with elephant scat. Jackie turned over each pile, broke it open and smelled it.

"Is that necessary?"

"I want to know who they are." She pointed to one worn pile. "African elephant. Female. Smells like she's the dominant one." She pointed behind. "There are three Indian females. One is still a little immature. She's unrelated to the other two. None of them are pregnant."

"What are you?"

"Indian. What? You didn't know?"

"It's not like you told me."

She snorted.

"Any boy elephants?"

"There were no males in Hohenwald."

"Why not?"

"Males need more space. They don't herd like females."

Michael thought for a moment. "Better hope your baby is a boy."

Jackie didn't answer.

They came to the point across the river where they had seen the herd, a long, hard packed sandbar held together with tough grass and cottonwoods. The scat here was plentiful. The elephants liked this place and returned to it often.

Michael leaned over her head. "Which way?"

"I'm not sure."

Michael slid to the ground. Jackie handed him his crutch. He moved around one side of the clearing while Jackie searched the other. The elephant markings were so numerous it was hard to figure out where they had gone.

"Over here," she called softly.

Michael hobbled over.

Jackie pointed to a large pile. "Male Indian. No more than a week ago."

"That's good, right?"

"Maybe."

She cried out suddenly. "Get down!" And swept him to the ground.

A dart stuck in Jackie's trunk where he had been standing.

Michael scrambled up to pull it out.

"Samsa!" cried a girl's voice from the brush. She ran out toward Jackie.

Michael tried to intercept her but was knocked to the ground again, this time by an older man. He held a knife to Michael's throat.

Jackie eased herself down to her knees. Then lay down on the ground.

"Jackie!" Michael cried out.

She looked blindly at the sound of his voice. Then it seemed as if her eyes were looking elsewhere. She closed them slowly.

"You've killed her," he said, not believing it.

"It was an accident, cripple," whispered the woman in a stricken voice. "I was aiming at you."

Part 4

The girl pulled the dart out of Jackie's trunk. "Will she die, Samsa?" the girl asked the man holding the knife to Michael's throat.

"I don't know," Samsa said. He pulled cord from a pouch belted around his waist and bound Michael's wrists.

"What? Do you think I'm going to run away?" Michael pushed his stump at him. "Cripple, remember?"

Samsa ignored him. He knelt next to Jackie. "She's breathing. That's a good sign. Maybe the dosage is too small."

"Dosage of what?" Michael stared at them. "What did you do to her?"

"Missed you," said Samsa, evenly. "Let's see the dart, Pinto."

Pinto gently brushed Jackie's eyes closed, picked up the dart and brought it to Samsa.

Samsa examined it carefully, deliberately avoiding the point. "Full dose, all right. Get the med kit in my tent back at camp."

"Got it." With that, the girl was gone, running up the trail away from the river.

Samsa examined Jackie minutely. He placed a hand on her chest to measure her breathing. After that, he held his hand under her trunk and stood silently.

"What are you doing?" Michael asked quietly.

"Shut up."

After a moment, Samsa released the trunk. "Pulse is good. Breathing is a little weak."

"That was a poison dart."

"You're a smart one."

"Why shoot me?"

"Let's see. You're riding the biggest piece of meat for twenty miles around—except for the dozen or so other pieces of meat just as big. You're not important, boy. She is. Too important to provide you a year's supply of steaks."

"You think I was going to eat her?"

"That would be a little ambitious. I think you were going to trade her. Maybe to the Angels in Memphis or the Rubber Girls in Chattanooga. They would have taken her and then served you up as a garnish—which would have been fine by me but we'd still be out an elephant."

"Jackie's not one of your elephants."

"I know that. Since you're accidentally alive you can tell me where you stole her."

"I didn't steal Jackie. I don't think anybody could do that. If she could talk, she'd tell you herself."

Samsa snorted. "I expect she'd have a lot to tell me, too."

Michael fell silent.

"Where did you get her?"

"Jackie and I came from Saint Louis. We were trying to find the elephants at Hohenwald. She wanted her own herd."

"Well, you found them. We'll take it from here."

"She's—"

Samsa pointed the dart at him. "There's enough left in this for a little slip of a thing like you. Even if it didn't kill you, it'll paralyze you until morning. The Komodos would find you long before that."

Michael stared at the point of the dart. The tip had a drop of oil on it. He couldn't look away.

"Don't," Jackie said in a long exhalation.

Samsa looked over at the elephant. He looked back at Michael. "She didn't just talk, did she?"

"Is she going to be all right?"

Samsa looked back at her. "I think so. The curare didn't kill her so it will wear off in a while. Pinto is bringing back the antidote."

"Then pretty soon you'll find out for yourself."

Pinto returned with a professional looking bag. She gave it to Samsa and went to sit next to Jackie. She huddled next to her head. Michael hoped she had sense enough to move away when Jackie got up.

Michael tried to figure out the two of them. Samsa was an older man. What little hair he had left was streaked with gray and matched his beard. He was tall and thin as if strung together with wires. Pinto wasn't much more than Michael's own age. Through her loose shirt Michael could see a suggestion of young breasts, but her legs and arms still looked childish. Michael wondered if Pinto had bartered protection the same way he had with Uncle Ned. They didn't look related.

Samsa pulled out two glass ampoules, one with a powder and the other a liquid, a syringe, and a wicked needle. He filled the syringe with the liquid and injected it into the ampoule with the powder and swirled it around to mix it. He caught Michael watching him.

"We don't have much call to use this so it's still in the original packaging." Samsa grinned at him. "We brew the poison ourselves."

"From what?"

"Poison arrow frogs down in the bayou. We go down there once or twice a year to catch what we need."

"I didn't know there were such animals."

"Pretty little things. Red. Blue. All sorts of colors. Skin carries a poison that will lay you out to dry if you mess with them. They didn't use to live down there but somebody's menagerie broke open—or was deliberately released—and some small group managed to survive the cooler winters. It's a nice weapon against humans—quiet. Quick. If you keep your wits about you, you can take down half a dozen people before they realize what's happening."

He finished shaking the ampoule and filled the syringe with the resulting mixture.

"Out of the way, Pinto," Samsa said. He swabbed a section of Jackie's hide and slipped the needle in. Then he withdrew the needle, broke it, and put the syringe and broken needle in a jar from the bag.

"She's still not going to be moving for a couple of hours but now her breathing won't be affected." He looked up at the hot sun. "We'll have to keep her cool." He looked at Michael. "Take your shirt off and wet it in the river. Keep it wet and on the elephant's head."

"Her name is Jackie."

"Jackie, then."

"Better untie me."

"You'll do fine with your hands tied together. Hop to it. Pinto? Help him but keep out of reach. Use your own shirt, too. I'll go get a couple of buckets."

Pinto kept a wary eye on Michael but he ignored her. The sun was hot even on his sweating body. He didn't want to imagine what Jackie felt like.

"Keep her ears wet, too," Pinto told him. "Elephants keep cool through their ears."

Michael grunted and bathed Jackie's ears.

"Did she knock you down?" Pinto asked as they passed one another on the way to the river.

"She saved my life," Michael said simply.

"Right."

Michael shrugged.

Samsa returned with two buckets and a rifle.

"I thought you liked poison," Michael said.

"I do. But it's hard to penetrate the hide of a crocodile with a dart."

"There are *crocodiles* in this river?"

"Not usually this far north but sometimes. The Komodos usually stay away, too. But not always. I'll keep watch, just in case."

Michael stopped and looked at Samsa. "You were a Keeper at Hohenwald."

"Director," Samsa corrected.

"So you let the elephants go when everybody died?"

Samsa cocked his head. "Eleven years ago."

"All the other elephants in Saint Louis died. Jackie and the Keeper decided she should look for the elephants down here."

"Did they, now?"

"Jackie's going to have a baby. Is the poison going to hurt it?"

Samsa sighed and looked over to her still form. "I should have picked that up right away." He turned back to Michael. "I hope not but there's no way to know. If she doesn't miscarry, it's a fair bet the baby will be all right." Samsa gestured to Michael. When Michael came close enough, Samsa untied his hands.

"I'm starting to believe you're not a poacher." He held up the gun. "But I still have the rifle."

Michael nodded and went back to filling buckets.

In the early afternoon, Jackie started twitching. An hour later, she was trying to get up. Samsa stood next to her, speaking soothingly. "Don't get up yet, girl." He gestured Michael and Pinto off the sand bank.

Jackie seemed to calm down and remained still. But it wasn't long until she heaved herself up, swaying and looking confused.

"It's okay, girl," Samsa said soothingly.

Jackie swung her trunk and knocked the rifle to the ground, then swung back, caught Samsa's leg and turned him over on his back. In a moment, she had a foot on his chest.

"You tried to kill my boy," she hissed.

Samsa tried to speak but couldn't.

Pinto ran to Jackie and tried to pull up her foot. Jackie ignored her.

"Are you all right, Michael?"

"Yeah."

"What do you want me to do with him?"

"Let him go," Michael said. "He's the director at Hohenwald."

Jackie slowly raised her foot. She carefully walked down the sandbar into the water and eased into it.

Pinto held Samsa's hand. She was crying. Michael squatted down next to him.

"She can talk," Samsa coughed out.

"I know," Michael said.

Dear Mom,

We found the other elephants. But the people that own them found us. Almost killed us, too. Me, anyway.

Samsa and Pinto were out tracking the herd. There is one big herd of six adult females and no calves. There are two other groups. One has three females and one calf. The other has four females and two calves.

Male elephants don't hang around except when they're in muss. Or muth. Or something. There are four males in the area.

All of them are Indian elephants except one: Tika. Tika is an african elephant. She's huge. She was the big elephant we saw at the stream. Samsa says it's possible for african and indian elephants to mate but she won't have any of the males. She's real strickt with her group. Maybe that's why they don't have calves.

Samsa let the elephants free when it looked like everybody was going to die, him included. But he didn't. Now there are fifteen people who help Samsa watch the elephants. They don't eat meat. They protect the elephants from people. Maybe they want to be elephants themselves.

They have their own little village near here. Samsa seems to run things from what I've seen. They want Jackie to come to the village. Jackie's not interested. She wants to join the herd. I think she's suspicious of them. They won't let me stay in the village. Maybe they still think I'm a poacher.

Love, Michael

"You need both legs to follow the elephants," said Samsa reasonably.

"I can get around pretty good with my crutch. Let me do something."

"You can't run. Sometimes the elephants charge and if you can't get up a tree quick enough, there won't be quite enough of you left to bury. We've lost people that way." Samsa and Pinto left before Michael could protest further.

Jackie was resting near the camp. She watched them from a distance. Michael had no doubt she could hear every word.

Michael hobbled over to her. He sat down next to her. She reached up and pulled down the branch of a birch tree and began methodically pulling the leaves off and eating them.

"They won't let me come with them," Michael said.

"So I heard."

The fog had come up the trail from the river and everything was swathed in mist. Michael felt cold and half blind. "How are you feeling?"

"Tired. Laying in the sun for half a day takes a lot out of you."

"Do you think there really are crocodiles in the river?"

"Do you think they're lying?"

Michael looked back to the fog. "I guess not. Do you know which band you're going after?"

Jackie didn't answer for a moment. "Tika's band, I think."

"Won't she be the hardest?"

"Probably."

"Then why her?"

Jackie was quiet a moment. "Silly reasons. It's surprising she even has a band with Indians in it. When you're desperate for company you'll take anything, I suppose."

Michael didn't speak immediately. His chest hurt and his throat felt thick. He stared up the trail where Samsa and Pinto had gone. Was that how he felt about them? Desperate? Was that how Jackie felt about him?

He went to their gear and opened up the hidden flap. He put together the rifle and took the exploding shells.

"What are you going to do?" Jackie stared at him.

"Follow them."

It was awkward to carry the rifle while he was still forced to use the crutch. He thought maybe he'd try to get down to one of the old cities and look for a leg. Or build one. He had a vague memory of a story about someone with a peg leg. That would be enough for him.

The trail was clear and Samsa and Pinto had left footprints so they weren't hard to follow. He'd catch up to them or he wouldn't. Either way he was doing *something*.

He could tell the trail was coming close to the river by the way the trees began to thin. Michael listened and he could hear splashing—probably the elephants. He found a tall tree, leaned the crutch against the trunk and slung the rifle over his back and started to climb.

From near the top, he had a commanding view of the river, the elephants, and Samsa and Pinto watching the elephants. He could also see the sunken logs slowly drifting toward the splashing of the elephants. He unslung the rifle and aimed it at one of the logs. The telescopic sight showed the crocodile clearly. He turned on the laser and saw the bright red spot appear on the animal's back. Then he watched.

Samsa and Pinto were watching the elephants. Samsa had a rifle but it was slung. He was talking, or maybe arguing, with Pinto. One of the crocodiles stopped, watching the bank. Then it submerged.

Let's see, thought Michael. Think like a croc—or a dragon. Go for the little target, not the big one. Where would I attack from if I were a crocodile?

The water erupted near Pinto.

Right there. For a moment, the crocodile was frozen in midleap, the red spot clearly showing on his neck. Michael squeezed off three shots. He saw the water and blood spurt where they hit.

Then time caught and the crocodile started to close his jaws on Pinto when the explosive rounds triggered.

There was no flash or sound but the crocodile fell to the ground, dragging Pinto down with him. Samsa pulled Pinto out of the animal's limp mouth. They scrambled back up the bank, blood showing on Pinto's legs. But the croc was unmoving.

The elephants roared out of the water and ran into the forest. Michael stayed there for some time but the river was empty save for the remaining crocs staying safely off shore.

He climbed down and made his way back to camp. Samsa was treating Pinto's wounds.

Michael put the rifle down and sat next to it.

"I have some use," he said.

Samsa was sitting across from him when Michael awoke.

"I want the rifle."

Michael sat up. "I'd like to live in the village and use it to help you. But what I'd really like is to have my leg back. But that's the way it is."

Samsa shook his head. "We don't know you. I can't have any weapon around that can kill an elephant in the hands of someone I don't know."

"You mean like the darts?"

"That's different." Samsa watched him a moment. "We could dart you and take it."

Michael pulled out the pistol and held it loosely. He didn't point it at Samsa but he didn't deliberately point it away. "You could pry it from my cold dead hands, I suppose."

"I know where that expression comes from. Do you?"

"Does it matter?" Michael was quiet for a moment. "I think it should be enough that Jackie trusts me."

"I don't think so. Jackie hasn't seen enough humans to know who to trust."

"Do tell," said Jackie from behind Samsa.

Michael looked up at Jackie. "You tell me what you want done with the rifle."

"Keep it," said Jackie shortly. "Likely you're a better shot with it than he is. Certainly, you're more trustworthy."

"I am the caretaker of the elephants," Samsa said in a controlled voice.

"That's not your job," said Jackie. "It's mine."

They didn't tell Samsa or Pinto or anyone else they were leaving. The village was up the hill and out of sight behind a bend in the trail. Michael certainly wasn't going out of his way to say goodbye. Even so, Michael could feel watchful eyes on him as they turned from the trail that led up the hill to the elephant scat covered trail that followed the bottomland.

"Tell me," Jackie said conversationally that afternoon. "Do you think Samsaville is on the map?"

Michael laughed for a long time.

The quality of their travel changed. Before, Michael had felt essentially alone in the forest. Other elephants were an abstraction. Other humans were absent. The very idea of a village was absurd.

But now Samsaville—the name stuck—loomed in his mind. He thought Jackie might think similarly about the elephants.

Dear Mom,

Jackie and I have left the other people and went to look for the elephants on our own. I'm not sure what's going to happen now. Maybe Jackie would be better without a one legged crippled kid.

I miss you and Dad. I miss Gerry. I even miss Uncle Ned. I miss my leg. It hurts at night.

Jackie's worried about joining the elephants. She doesn't say so but I can tell. Maybe Samsa will follow us. Maybe he'll dart me or worse. Maybe Tika won't let us join. Maybe something bad will happen.

Whatever happens, I love you.

Michael

* * *

They found Tika two days later. It was mid-morning. The herd was grazing on the edge of a clearing. Worn buildings marked the clearing as having once been a farm. Michael looked at the ancient stubble of corn shocks and rusting machinery. This farm had never seen a robot. It had been abandoned long ago.

Tika had already turned to face them before Jackie and Michael left the forest. She must have heard them coming, thought Michael. Or smelled them.

Jackie stopped well short of them and started grazing on the opposite side of the clearing. After an hour or so, Tika returned to grazing with the other females. But her attention never wavered from Jackie.

Afternoon came and the herd disappeared into the forest. Michael slid down to the ground and made himself a lunch out of dried fruit and crocodile jerky.

"Samsa is watching us," Jackie muttered and she stood near Michael. "Up on the ridge. I can smell him."

Michael nodded. "Is he going to shoot me?"

"I can't smell a gun but that doesn't mean much."

"Anybody else?"

Jackie shook her head. "Not as far as I can tell."

"Nothing to be done, then."

Michael chewed the crocodile jerky. Not bad. Sort of like chicken. "I wonder why the dragons don't come across the bridges. Do you think there's something here they don't like?"

"Maybe the elephants kill them. I know I would."

"You did."

"True." Jackie thought for a moment. "It's a mistake to think this ecology is complete. Humans left it very recently. It could be the Komodos just haven't reached this far yet. The Komodos have to migrate north from the coast every spring and return every fall. It's going to take time for them to penetrate new areas. Any place they go can only be as far as they can return to in time to avoid the winter."

"They could learn to winter up here."

"Unlikely."

"They're unlikely, right? Who knows what they can do?"

Jackie was silent for a moment. "That's not something I want to think about."

Michael shivered. "Me, neither."

The next week followed the same ritual. The elephants came to the abandoned farm and grazed, moving over to new areas as they stripped the old of leaves. By the week's end, Jackie and Tika had circled the entire clearing. Still standing opposite one another, Jackie was now where they had first sighted Tika and Tika was grazing where Jackie had first entered the clearing.

"Today we have to follow them," said Michael. He spat out the last of the meat. He was tired of crocodile jerky.

"It's too soon."

"Look around you." Michael pointed at the trees. "There's nothing left. They're not going to come back here just to say hello."

Tika chivvied her herd back to the clearing's entrance. Jackie followed at a respectful distance. Tika kept turning to check on them.

"This might work out," Jackie whispered.

They followed the band for hours. The smell of Samsa and the other humans faded. The trail became wilder and more curved until they couldn't see the band for minutes at a time. Then they turned a corner in the trail and Tika was facing them.

Jackie stopped dead still. Michael had been leaning forward, resting his head on Jackie's head and watching. He froze, not wanting to draw attention to himself.

Tika approached cautiously, trunk half raised and sniffing the air. Jackie raised her trunk slightly. When the two of them were close enough, they sniffed each other with their trunks. Tika seemed to relax.

Michael watched. It came to him that Tika wanted Jackie in her band—maybe because she was pregnant. Maybe because there were dangers enough out here for everybody to share.

Tika suddenly whipped her trunk over Jackie's head and caught Michael squarely in the side, sweeping him off Jackie's neck and down on the ground in front of Tika.

Michael fell the ten feet in a moment of frozen astonishment and landed hard on his back, knocking the wind out of him. Desperately, he tried to force himself to breathe, cough, anything. But his lungs stubbornly refused to fill.

Tika raised her leg over him.

Michael saw the details of her foot, the broken toenail, the puckered scar.

Jackie screamed "No!" and stepped over him, shoving Tika away.

Tika stumbled back and then shoved back.

Jackie stood foursquare over him, her head and trunk down.

Michael's breath caught and he sat up, watched twenty tons of animals shoving above him.

"Move," Jackie cried.

Michael scrambled away. *A tree! Where's a tree?* He saw an oak and hopped over to it, clawed his way up the trunk and into the branches high enough to escape Tika.

Jackie fell back in front of the tree, facing Tika.

Tika trumpeted at her.

It was as if she shouted in English: *You we want. But not with him.*

Jackie trumpeted back. *Not without him.*

"Jackie," he shouted. "Go with them. I'll be okay."

Tika fell back, staring at the two of them.

"No," Jackie said. "Both of us or not at all."

Michael found himself crying.

Part 5

Dear Mom,

It's been a while since I wrote but I've been busy. Little Bill is just as stubborn as his mother. Jackie says he outgrew the cute phase when he was two. Now she thinks it's just unpleasant. But I like him. He reminds me of his mother.

I think Tika's finally accepted me. It took long enough. She's allowed me to stay all this time by just ignoring me. But a few weeks ago before we left Panacea one of her toenails got infected and needed to be lanced and cleaned. It was pretty clear it had to be done before we started north. Jackie stood next to me to make sure I didn't get hurt. But Tika brought over her foot and didn't twitch when I cleaned out the wound. It must have hurt. It looks lots better now.

That was just after I shot two Komodos that had decided to make a meal out of Tika's leg. The Komodos aren't much problem in the winter. They're all asleep somewhere. But between the time they wake up in the spring and the time they start north, they're pretty hun-

gry and mean. I can't say for sure what made Tika change her mind. But she seemed pretty happy that Jackie and I were walking next to her when we went North this year.

Things are still changing. The Komodos are tough but they seem to have a hard time with the brush lions. We're not sure. Where we find brush lions, there aren't any Komodos and where we find Komodos there aren't any brush lions. We don't know exactly what's going on.

And the fire ants keep spreading north.

Good news this spring. Both Tanya and Wilma are pregnant. The bull that visited around Christmas must have done his job. More young ones for Little Bill to play with.

We're not far from Samsaville. It'll be nice to see Pinto and Samsa. I'm trying to persuade Jackie we should go far enough north to see Gerry. But she doesn't like going through dragon country.

All for now,

Love,

Michael

Michael finished signing his name and closed the notebook. It was almost filled. This would be book number seven. He hefted it in his hands. He wondered if he was a little off in his head to be writing his dead mother all these years. He was sixteen now. Michael shrugged. He still liked doing it. Maybe Jackie would have an opinion on it.

He put down his pack and watched the river flow by. Mostly he just enjoyed the play of sunlight and color on the water. It was a careful observation, too. Keeping track of floating logs nearby that might leap out at him. The crocodiles had become more numerous in the last couple of years. Michael didn't know what they were eating but so far none had tasted elephant on his watch.

Little Bill came down to the edge of the bank. *Little?* Michael smiled to himself. Bill's head was two feet taller than he was.

"Jackie's-Boy! Jackie's-Boy!" he piped, a tiny voice for such a large body. Michael wondered when, and if, the elephant's voice would ever break into the deep timbre of an adult. Michael's had. Well, mostly. Sometimes it still cracked.

"Just Michael," he said. "Like I always say. Just Michael."

"Jackie's-Boy is what Tika calls you."

Michael chuckled, wondering, not for the first time, how an elephant spoke without being able to speak. The world was filled with mysteries. "Does she now?"

"Are you ready to go?" piped Bill. "Tika sent me to get you. She wants you and Jackie to go first."

Michael reached down and pulled up his artificial leg and fastened it on. "Really? Tika wants us to lead?"

"Sure. At least as far as Cobraville."

"Ah. She wants us to cross the fire ants first, eh?"

"Yeah."

"Will wonders never cease?"

Little Bill didn't answer. Instead, he made a leg. Michael shouldered the rifle and climbed up over his neck. He looked around. The blue bowl of the sky above him, the warm sun, his gray family patiently waiting for him half a mile away. He felt like singing.

Lovingly, he patted the top of Little Bill's head.

"Well, then. Musn't grumble," he said with a grin. "Let's go." O

THIRD WORLD WORLDS

Norman Spinrad

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First we had better define what is generally meant by the "Third World." The expression itself was born during the late Cold War. The United States, its NATO allies in Europe, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan, being the ones doing the defining, called themselves the "First World." The Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, the satellite nations of the Warsaw Pact, and assorted other Communist states, being defined as the enemy, were called the "Second World."

The Third World was everything else, more or less.

The Cold War is gone, no one talks about the First World or the Second World anymore, but the label "Third World" for "everything else" is still current.

But *everything else than what?*

You will notice from the lists of the original definitions that the First World, with the exception of the Japanese who were granted the status of "Honorary Aryans" by their Nazi allies during World War II, was a collection of countries with a dominant Caucasian majority of European descent, and that the Second World was more of the same, with the large exception of China, and some other smaller exceptions.

Basically, the Third World was Latin America, Africa, and most of Asia, including India, Pakistan, Indonesia, the so-called "Arab World," and so forth, and that is still more or less what is meant by the term today. Another, and more politically incorrect term for this basket of nations was once the "underdeveloped nations," now the politically correct "developing nations," meaning more or less the same thing.

Meaning what?

Meaning existing, one way or another, to one degree or another, outside what the "Developed World" in general and the United States in particular is pleased to consider "globalized world civilization."

Meaning those nations and peoples having attained the current height of technological prowess and cutting edge science, enjoying one form of democratic government or another, or at least a good pretense thereof, economically integrated into the world-spanning economic spiderweb of globalized capitalism, and cul-

turally integrated into the worldwide info and showbiz spiderweb created and dominated by "Hollywood."

Considered by most of its inhabitants as more or less the "consensus reality," the "global civilization" of the planet Earth.

And yet, if you add up all the inhabitants of the Third World, there are more of "them" than there are of "us." The "global civilization" may dominate the Earth economically, scientifically, technologically, militarily, politically, and even perhaps culturally, or anyway pop culturally, but the culturally diverse "developing nations" of the Third World dominate demographically.

What, you may now be asking, does all this have to do with science fiction?

What indeed?

Or better, what does science fiction have to do with the worlds of the Third World?

The answer would seem to be not much, or at least not nearly as much as it should.

Now I must confess that I do not read Mandarin Chinese, any African language, Arabic—indeed any Asian language at all—and I must also confess for we Anglophones, that, with the exception of Japanese, hardly any, maybe no, science fiction written in these languages has been translated into English, or for that matter other European languages, and it would seem that such science fiction may hardly exist at all.

If one includes Latin America in the Third World, a hot-button political minefield I intend to sidestep here, it's a large exception to this, since there is a goodly amount of science fiction written there in Spanish and Portuguese. But these are languages of European origin, and therefore not entirely culturally disconnected from the self-styled First World. With the exception of the Japanese, I at least, am at a loss to point to any science fiction that I know of that has evolved independently in non-European languages or cultures disconnected therefrom.

If it exists, I haven't seen a significant amount of it translated into any language I can read, however badly, nor have I read much about it in secondary sources. So what we'll be considering here is Anglophone science fiction written in English by Anglophone writers about the past, present, or futures of so-called "Third World" cultures.

There has always been a certain amount of this stuff, but there's getting to be more of it of late, and it's getting better, more sophisticated, more embedded in the cultures in which it is set—less culturally "colonialist" if you will, and even if you won't.

I'm not trying to get into a political argument here, but I certainly could, since most Anglophone fiction set in Third World countries in general, from the eighteenth century onward into the twentieth and even the dawn of the twenty-first, *has* been colonialist, in that the points of view from which the tales are narrated have mostly been those of "First World" protagonists dropped down or embedded in "Third World" settings, and not those of "native" inhabitants thereof.

This is not surprising, really, nor really that much of a political scandal, since, after all, the people writing this fiction were for the most part cultural and psychological products of the First World, not the Third. Even when they were living in Third World venues, indeed even when they grew up there themselves, whether they were political or economic colonialists or not, they were colonists or tourists in alien lands.

But there is that word—*alien*.

Anglophone science fiction has a long history of stories of contact between non-human civilizations and ourselves. Anglophone science fiction has perhaps a smaller but quite significant trove of novels and stories written from the points of view, even the first person points of view, of non-human sapients who differ from us not merely in biology or technological level or cultural assumptions, but style of consciousness itself.

We've got the literary tools. We've de-

veloped them over nearly a century. Anglophone science fiction writers fear not to tackle alien beings, civilizations, and consciousnesses from other planets.

But what about the ones on *this* one?

Well, Mike Resnick has been writing science fiction set in Kenya for decades now—of which the novel *Ivory* set in past and future and now reissued by Pyr is exemplary—and doing a good job of it, maybe as good a job as any science fiction writer has done with this sort of thing. That is, science fiction with major and even central point of view characters formed by Third World cultures. And in *Ivory* at least, portraying future societies evolved from those cultures rather than from what we in the so-called First World are pleased to consider our progressive, dominant, so-called global civilization.

Resnick fell in love with Kenya on safari a long time ago, and has been carrying on the intermittent love affair ever since, and there is genuine feeling and affection for Kenya, and by extension Africa, or at least East Africa, in this body of his work.

And yet there is something quite Hemingway-esque about it, and I mean this as neither a compliment nor an insult but descriptively. Ernest Hemingway was a great writer with a varied body of Nobel class work who, like Mike Resnick, set some of his major fiction in Africa, *The Snows Of Kilimanjaro* in Kenya, in fact.

I am not going to contend that Resnick is in general a better writer than Hemingway (sorry about that, Mike) or even that his "African" fiction is literally superior to Hemingway's, though in another more specific sense it is. It is more genuinely African.

Not perfectly African, for Resnick, like Hemingway, is the product of American First World culture, not Third World African culture. Hemingway's fiction set in Africa is forthrightly that of First World characters embedded in African settings but not really African culture, and he never really puts native African characters front and center or presents

their world-views or consciousnesses from the inside, perhaps because trying to do it never interested him, perhaps because he correctly judged that making such a leap was beyond his literary powers.

But Mike Resnick most certainly is very much interested in taking his African fiction there, making the sort of attempt that Hemingway never cared to dare, portraying African characters, African central characters, from the inside, at the least to the extent possible. And more, something Hemingway probably couldn't even conceptualize, extrapolating future, not degenerate, but further evolved African culture.

Mike Resnick, after all, is a science fiction writer, and imagining highly evolved "alien" cultures is a central part of the trade, as is getting inside the heads of their inhabitants, as is the most central concept of science fiction, the one that by definition only science fiction possesses, indeed that which makes it science fiction—extrapolation itself.

I suspect that virtually everyone reading this in this magazine knows just what I'm saying. I suspect that were it being published in, say, *The New York Review of Books* or the *New York Times Book Review*, half the readership wouldn't even comprehend what "extrapolation" meant in literary terms.

So, for now at least, and in the apparent absence of a significant body of science fiction written by born and bred Africans, this Caucasian American is probably the closest thing there is or has been to an African science fiction writer, with the exception of Octavia Butler. Who did write the same sort of thing, and did it well, and was Black to boot, but I use that politically incorrect word rather than "African American" because aside from her genetic heritage she was no more African than Mike Resnick.

Paul McAuley is a British writer I have admired long enough to wish that his work was more readily available in the United States, and now Pyr has published his latest novel, *The Quiet War*.

In one way, this is a very traditional science fiction novel, being the oft told story of the struggle of the culturally and politically variegated inhabited moons of Jupiter and Saturn and points beyond to maintain their independence and freedom from the nasty governments of depleted old Earth.

This sort of thing is usually one kind of libertarian screed or another; the humans of the asteroids and the outer moons adapting to their varying conditions biologically and politically and eventually speciating into clades of genus homo, seen as a positive evolutionary step by the writer and therefore hopefully the reader, with the forces of the homeworld seen as the reactionary tight-ass bad guys.

McAuley is more or less operating from this political and evolutionary point of view too, and the dénouement more or less follows the tradition. But *The Quiet War* is much more interesting than the usual such thing because, without giving too much away, McAuley admits of the possibility of tragedy, and on both sides of the coin.

Indeed, for most of the length of the novel, there isn't any war—well, not exactly—and the interwoven story lines are for the most part those of people trying to prevent it. And I thought that McAuley was just maybe going to do the unthinkable, outrageous to the usual readership, delightful to me, and something I didn't think had ever been done before—spend a whole novel leading up to the climactic outbreak of war, only to have it heroically prevented.

I will say no more in order not to give away any more, but I guess I can at least say that McAuley brings this conventionally utterly outré and morally and politically mind-bending new literary concept and political possibility front and center.

Another unusual thing that Paul McAuley does here is make the dominant terrestrial neo-colonial power, or anyway the only one we see in operation, "Greater Brazil." In *The Quiet War*, the United

States is down the willy-hole, and the Earth is divided up into three sometimes competing sphere-of-influence powers—the European Union, a kind of Greater China that includes most of Asia, and Greater Brazil, overlord of the Americas and some points beyond. This not only with a nod to George Orwell's *1984*, but with reference to same by some of the characters.

Greater Brazil is a green theocracy dedicated to the ecological revival of the human-devastated Earth, well on its way to more or less successful completion. It is spiritually led from a Zenlike distance, like the other two blocks, by a "Green Saint," but ruled by a quite nasty forthrightly feudal military-capitalist plutocracy that pretty much actually owns its serfs, including even the well-off and high ranking ones like major scientists.

McAuley does a fine job of creating this entirely believable space age feudal semi-dictatorship, except for the final dénouement, which seems a kind of well-meaning cop-out add-on to an otherwise far darker outcome that the novel seemed to have been heading for, as if McAuley wanted to end it in a far less formulaic and semi-tragic manner. Or maybe this is something I'm reading into it because I did something similar to the end of my first novel, *The Solarians*, and have regretted it ever since.

Be all that as it may, *The Quiet War* is a fine and generally successful novel.

But there's something pro-forma about McAuley's Greater Brazil, or anyway the Brazilian identification of the very well rendered culture of his future terrestrial green feudal capitalist imperialist power, so that this doesn't really hurt the novel per se, but there seems to me to be nothing essentially Brazilian about it. Change some names, some locales, and so forth, and it would work just as well as "Greater Congo" or "Greater Indonesia."

It's almost as if McAuley had good political reasons not to make it "Greater North America," let alone the "Greater United States," or even the European

Union, which he mentions but doesn't visit or describe, and figured Greater Brazil was as good a "non-America" as any. And since the society he describes is just about entirely his own invention, it doesn't really affect the story one way or the other.

If there was a more specific reason for making "Greater Brazil" the terrestrial heavy, I don't get it, since the future updated feudal plutocracy doesn't seem to have much of a Brazilian flavor, especially to someone who has read Ian McDonald's *Brasyl*, which so thoroughly places the reader in such strongly and completely Brazilian futures.

I happen to know that there are in fact Brazilian science fiction writers, but I wonder if any of them have created extrapolated future Brazilian cultures as deeply rooted in their own culture as has McDonald, an outsider from Ulster. How did McDonald take it to such a deeper level? One might suppose that he had some special personal connection to Brazil beforehand and that therefore *Brasyl* was a special case from which there is no general lesson for a writer seeking to learn something of the technique.

Except that McDonald has done exactly the same thing with India in the novel *River of Gods*, and in the collection of stories, *Cyberabad Days*, some of which seem to have been written before the novel, and some afterward, and all of it set in the same highly complex, masterfully rendered, and totally Indian future. To do this once might be a *sui generis* fluke, but to do it twice, with two totally different cultures, and in such rapid succession, would seem to indicate that Ian McDonald has developed some kind of generalized method.

A blurb from an Indian newspaper review of *River of Gods* admitted that it was pretty good for a foreigner, which brings up the question of whether or not any Indian science fiction writer has done anything nearly as good with the same cultural material. I happen to know that there are Indian science fiction writ-

ers, having had dinner with one, Dilip Salwi. But he is primarily a scientist, as I remember, and that Indian newspaper review, or at least the extract, didn't seem to have brought up an example of a work by a native Indian writer who did the same thing better.

So what's the secret method? Well, what do McDonald's fictional future India and his fictional future Brazil share in common?

They both seem very well researched in terms of what can be researched—the history, the geography, the cuisine, the settings, and so forth of the real pasts and presents out of which the fictional extrapolated futures arise. But that would have to be said of any successful historical novel, the relationship of which to science fiction of this sort we will get to later with *In The Courts Of The Sun*.

I had to deal with something of the sort in *Russian Spring*, set partly in the fairly near future of a Moscow I had never seen before I had written two drafts of the novel, and when I went to the then Soviet Union for its publication more than one reader paid me the compliment of saying that they couldn't believe it wasn't written by a Russian.

Well, I know what I did aside from the standard sort of research. I read contemporary Russian novels. I read a history of Russian rock and roll written by a prominent Russian rock critic and entrepreneur, and I listened to what examples I could find of the music. I tried to immerse myself as best I could in contemporary Russian *popular culture* without ever even having been there at the time so that I could extrapolate a Russian future as rooted in the *real* Russian cultural present, rather than the official or academic one, as much as I could manage.

And what I did pales in comparison to what Ian McDonald did in *Brasyl* and his Indian future, an immersion in the popular culture—music, sports, styles, urban legends, cults, religions, trends, television soap operas, television reality

shows, etc.—orders of magnitude beyond.

Okay, to write fiction as well as McDonald does requires a talent that can't be taught, and to write science fiction this puissant requires an extrapolative gift that probably can't be taught as method either. But upon reflection, and in comparison to something like *The Last Theorem*, which we will get to shortly, I do believe there is a lesson that can be learned from McDonald by any First World writer trying to write science fiction set in the future of any Third World culture not their own.

Which is that despite the twenty-first century global show biz sphere, despite the global Internet infosphere, despite the seeming universality of Anglo-American popular music, despite the supposed globalization of so-called high culture, major "non-western" civilizations like those of India, Brazil, Japan, West Africa, and so forth have developed, continue to develop, and will probably always continue to evolve *their own popular cultures*.

And these popular cultures—the music people are currently listening to, the TV shows they are watching, what they wear, their junk foods, their street-level life, their criminal gangs, their sports, their waves of transient fads, cults, urban legends, their media spheres—are what *really* create the consciousnesses of their inhabitants in the permanently and rapidly mutating twenty-first century and for any foreseeable non-devolutionary future.

And therefore, if you are not taking these true full-spectrum presents into account, when you try to extrapolate their future evolutions, you can't quite get it. This is what is missing from Paul McAuley's *Greater Brazil*, and to make it more glaringly obvious, consider the great reams of science fiction of the 1950s, 1960s into the 1970s, and much of the same sort of thing still written today by *American* science fiction writers extrapolating *American-based* futures.

If you're not au courant with the popu-

lar culture of your *own* civilization, your extrapolated future thereof is going to lack a certain level of conviction, because it cannot truly bring to life the consciousnesses of characters that have developed under its evolving influence. And on the deepest level, it is consciousness that creates overall culture, as much as culture creates consciousness, in a spiraling feedback loop.

And if it's difficult enough to do with the total culture that your own consciousness has evolved within, what a bitch it is to succeed in doing it with *another* popular culture. So difficult that most science fiction writers dealing with their own cultures, let alone "alien" cultures of any kind, consciously or not, opt to ignore it.

Even the most experienced recognized masters of science fiction like Frederik Pohl and Arthur C. Clarke. Even though Clarke lived in Sri Lanka for decades. Even the two of them collaborating on a novel like *The Last Theorem*.

A novel like *The Last Theorem*?

Well, no, there never has been a novel like *The Last Theorem*, and I seriously doubt that there ever can be again.

Whether Pohl will ever write another novel remains to be seen, but Sir Arthur certainly won't, since he was facing his own death after a very long and very productive life when he began this one in failing health in his ninth decade, felt he could not complete it on his own, and died soon after it was successfully completed in collaboration with Pohl. Both the introductions and the text of the novel make it quite clear that this was meant as Sir Arthur C. Clarke's final literary testimony, and would serve almost as well for that of Frederik Pohl unless and until he decides to write another.

Needless to say, *The Last Theorem*, therefore, is quite literally a monument in, and in a sense to, the history of science fiction. And, it would seem, deliberately meant as such by two of the greatest writers of traditional twentieth century science fiction, almost frantically seeking to use their mighty extrapolative powers to

reach beyond their self-recognized imminent departures from the scene.

That is both its strength and its weakness.

The main protagonist of *The Last Theorem* is the Sri Lankan mathematician Ranjit Subramanian. Subramanian wins the Nobel Prize for creating the totally rigorous proof of Fermat's "Last Theorem"—the theorem being real enough, but the proof being fictional and unspecified, since, after all, if Clarke and/or Pohl actually produced it, the Nobel would be theirs. Though from the introductions and the mathematical games in the novel, one suspects that they may have actually tried.

The novel narrates the life of Subramanian from boyhood through old age, and in a certain manner even predictably beyond into electronic immortality. He gets married, has a family, gets innocently caught in a piracy hijacking and haplessly jailed as one of the hijackers, he gets involved in complex international geopolitical hugger-mugger involving a sub rosa United Nations security outfit and the American National Security Agency. He becomes involved in an ultimately successful project to build a Space Elevator anchored in Sri Lanka planetside. His wife sickens terminally, and is uploaded to electronic immortality, and it is indicated and foreshadowed at the end of the novel that Ranjit will join her there at the end of his protoplasmic life.

And that's not all, far from it. There's a whole other plot thread involving the "Grand Galactics," all-powerful alien rulers of the galaxy, and their forthrightly subject races, who among grander things in their own eyes, take it unto themselves to decide which sapient species are fit to become their subjects, and which must be exterminated for the greater good. Humanity does not make the cut.

Meanwhile, the UN has developed a weapon that can fry an entire nation's electronic infrastructure while harming no one, and begins using it to bring down unpleasant regimes and usher in an era

of peace where war has been technologically rendered impossible.

Clarke and Pohl have crammed two long productive lifetimes of technological, mathematical, political, philosophical, and even moral and theological passions, hopes, obsessions, and neato science fictional ideas into a 290 page novel, not counting the abundant forewords and afterwords.

As if, approaching the end of the journey, they have heard and harkened to what Brian Kirby, the editor of Essex House, the most literary line of porn novels ever published, used to tell his writers—"Get it all out!"

They do. Clarke's long-time dream of building a space elevator anchored in Sri Lanka. Pohl's long-time dream of world peace brought about by technology rather than politics. Pohl's long-time fascination with mathematical fun and games. The nature of quantum reality. The immortality of the soul, if you will, and consciousness if you won't, achieved by uploading into computer storage. Humanity proving its worth and right to continue to exist to far more powerful aliens by demonstrating moral achievement.

In a sense, *The Last Theorem*, consciously meant at least by Clarke as "the last novel," is both a summing up of two long careers and a compendium of the central concerns not only of these two writers but of an era of science fiction itself and a major trend within the genre even today—Arthur C. Clarke's somewhat reluctant technologically based transcendentalism and mighty passion for the expansion of the human species beyond the bounds of Earth, Frederik Pohl's cynical and knowing brand of political utopianism and passion to see true peace in his time, and the dream of contact with non-human sapients shared by both of them. The latter has been the central core of science fiction itself for something like a century.

You may well be asking whether it is possible for even the combined talents of Arthur C. Clarke and Frederik Pohl to

bring all this together in some kind of overall coherent story structure. Amazingly enough, the answer is yes they can, yes they do. And stranger still, the first quarter or so of *The Last Theorem* is sort of wasted, rather ploddingly introducing Ranjit Subramanian as a young boy and dragging the reader through his growing up, education, and so forth in what seems like an obligatory manner, while maintaining just about enough intercut build-up of the Grand Galactic shtick to keep the reader interested until the novel really gets going.

This is the worst part of the novel by far. It comes across as rather dull, schematic, passionless, and colorless. This is both truly odd and yet quite revelatory as an almost textbook example in extremis of how the failure of an Anglophone writer from the outside to really embed himself in the street-level popular culture of the Third World society in which he is setting the story can place the reader at the same less-than-deeply involved remove.

Most of the first third or so of the novel, and indeed the bulk of the rest of it, is set in a future version of Sri Lanka, where Clarke lived for decades. Yet when it came to this novel set in his adopted homeland, he, even with the assistance of Pohl, could not do for Sri Lanka what Ian McDonald did for India and Brazil. And this is not the failure of some mediocre writer, nor the failure of an entire novel, but the failure of an aspect of a novel of considerable merit.

Dare I say it?

I guess I must.

There is a whiff of colonialism here—not political colonialism, not economic colonialism, not white man's burden bullshit, but the sense that Sir Arthur C. Clarke, for all his years as an inhabitant of Sri Lanka, remained in it, but not quite of it.

Michael Moorcock more or less openly wrestles with this in "The Cairene Purse," a long novella in the collection *The Best Of Michael Moorcock*, published by Tachyon. Indeed his first per-

son protagonist does so in a story that takes place in a more or less near future Egypt, and has more or less resolved it in favor of total immersion even as the story begins.

Moorcock is a born and bred Londoner now living not in North Africa but in Texas, but he has spent quite a bit of time in the Magreb, and openly but knowingly loves it. He is also a politically savvy, historically knowledgeable, and forthrightly but subtly anarchistically inclined Brit, who understands, knows well, and casts a jaundiced but not entirely unsympathetic eye on the British colonial mentality in its several variations.

Here his medium-rank career UN official embarks on an odyssey and personal vision quest in search of his sister, who has disappeared into the depths, in several senses, of Moorcock's future Egypt, and takes the reader along with him through many levels, both "native" and "neo-colonial," of a future Third World culture deeply connected to its millennial past but not fossilized by it. Here we meet the Blimpish sort of British colonial mentality, or rather the insulated and isolated remnants thereof, but also the mystical Lawrence of Arabia sort seeking total immersion in the culture of the Other, and all of it narrated by a consciousness not only partaking in somewhat circumscribed aspects of both, but informed by a judicious sense of irony about the whole and its parts.

Indeed, in a way, that's what "The Cairene Purse" is centrally about, even though Moorcock does inject a science fictional McGuffin for plot purposes and perhaps, in the real world, where the outlets for novellas outside of SF are few and far between, in order to make it more publishable.

Moorcock's point of view, that of his point of view character, is immersed in his future Egypt, but not unanalytical of it. One wonders what he would do with the story of an expatriate science fiction writer living for decades in Sri Lanka. Moorcock, like McDonald, is able to im-

merse himself and the reader in his fictional Third World future, but unlike McDonald, maintains a subtle ironic distance.

In the same collection, we find "London Bone," in which Moorcock does much the same thing with his beloved London, but does it through the first person viewpoint of a roguish protagonist with no sense of analytical irony at all, proof that Michael Moorcock knows just what he's about in this mode, and capable of shading the possible subtle differences within it.

He's also written some more or less straight historical fiction in somewhat similar style. This leads to a reflection on the similarities, at least in terms of necessary research and literary methods, of speculative and historical fiction, exemplified by Brian D'Amato's *In the Courts of the Sun*, which incorporates both in the same novel on a rigorous and utterly convincing level, albeit with flaws as huge as its genius virtues.

An otherwise great novel severely damaged by amateurish mistakes and cynical commercial strategy.

How great?

In the Courts of the Sun is both rigorous near-future science fiction, rigorous almost to a fault, and meticulously researched historical fiction, or perhaps better, historical fantasy, set in the deep Mayan past. No contradiction, because the same Jed Delanda is the protagonist and first person narrator in both time-streams.

Well, sort of.

And sort of not.

Jed, of Mayan descent, is an adept of the ancient Mayan "Sacrifice Game," more a kind of divination game than chess or go. The ancient Mayans had a very complex yet very accurate calendar that dealt with vast eons of time; that much is historical fact. The Mayans and the Aztecs, among others, viewed their well-developed astronomy as inseparable from divinatory astrology; that too is historical fact. Whether the Sacrifice Game actually existed, or might even

persist somewhere today, may be another matter, but this is fiction, and D'Amato makes it quite plausible.

Before I go any further, I must confess, if that is the word, that I am something of an expert on the later Aztec civilization, due to the research I did for my own historical novel *Mexica*. This on the one hand may be germane to my analysis of what D'Amato has accomplished, and on the other hand makes me marvel at it in no little awe all the more.

Ancient Mayan codices predict the end of the world in our era on a very specific date shortly approaching, and some kind of lesser disaster to foreshadow it. When an enormous plague caused by radioactive terrorism at Disney World, retrospectively predicted by the Mayans in symbolic detail, kills many thousands and renders vast areas around it toxic to life, the end of the world prediction gets taken very seriously.

Jed, with his knowledge of the Sacrifice Game, is recruited by a secret project to time-travel back to the deep past in Mayan Guatemala and Mexico to play the Game there with greater adepts—perfect masters, as it were—learn just what is going to happen on the appointed date in 2012, and send back the information, so that hopefully, somehow, it can be prevented.

Well, sort of. It's not exactly time travel. Nothing material can be sent back, but D'Amato does a very good rubber science quantum physics justification of the ability to send Jed's immaterial consciousness pattern back in time to the targeted brain of a Mayan ruler who is going to secretly survive his own required ritual sacrifice by sending a double down the pyramid.

There is a glitch in the process and Jed gets downloaded into the brain of the double instead. The historical stream of the action takes off from there as he escapes, as his consciousness and that of his unwilling host battle each other for control, and finally merge, more or less, via a long, beautifully detailed, and, discounting the fantasy aspects, meticulous

lously and even obsessively accurately researched vision quest through the ancient Mayan civilization.

I am peculiarly qualified to appreciate this achievement because of what I had to do to write *Mexica*, a straight historical set in the later period of the Spanish Conquest of Mexico. I thought I did quite a good job, and many Mexicans agreed, but D'Amato carries it an order of magnitude further, and in this aspect I must bow to a master. The historical details, the religion, the arts, the whole enchilada, he even writes *dialog* in ancient Mayan!

And as I indicated, D'Amato does much the same thing for the near-future science fiction thread, the rubber physics, the absolutely realistic details of the evacuation of much of Florida, and so forth. And Jed DeLanda is a fully rounded, realistically flawed, interesting, and sympathetic character in both incarnations.

That's how great *In the Courts of the Sun* is.

But, as I said, it is severely damaged by amateurish mistakes and cynical commercial strategy.

In the Courts of the Sun is the first volume of a projected and perhaps even already written trilogy. And the date of the projected end of the world is in 2012. Meaning it will have passed before the whole trilogy can be published, maybe even about the time the paperback of *In the Courts of the Sun* is published. Huge mistake! Orwell at least gave himself decades before the title would become obsolete with 1984. D'Amato doesn't even give himself time for the whole trilogy to be published in paperback.

Worse still, this long novel ends with a minor climax in which only the basically uninteresting identity of the Disney World terrorist is revealed, not even the nature of the end of the world event to come in a later volume. And the way the trilogy would seem to be structured, the latter almost has to be at the end of the final volume, because it would seem to have to be the final dénouement of

the whole three-volume narrative structure.

Tension may not last long, though, since the third book is due out right around the time the world is scheduled to end.

It's hard for me to fathom how both the author and the publisher could have missed a howler like this. But there is another flaw of a deeper literary and characterological nature which, hopefully, D'Amato may already plan to deal with in subsequent installments, or if not, should think about if he ends up reading this.

The only way the Jed in Mayan times can send back what he has learned then to 2012 is to arrange to have it and himself buried in a pre-arranged site and archeologically retrieved. More direly existentially still, the process that sends his consciousness back in time has an unfortunate consequence to the host's brain—it induces the onset of brain cancer that will kill that host body within months.

That is, kill that past iteration of Jed DeLanda. And that Jed DeLanda, having the memories of his future iteration, *knows* it. Yet he hardly seems to ponder it, his own imminent death hardly seems to matter to him at all, except in terms of setting a time limit on the mission.

Yet the Jed who is to die is not the Jed who will live in the future. And they both know it. Surely this is an existential question that should haunt both of them. Why does not the Jed in the past hate the Jed in the future for sending him back to this shortened life span and grisly death sentence? Where are the Jed in the future's moral qualms about condemning his literal alter ego to such a fate?

In a tale where such deep and ultimate questions are raised by the facts of the storyline and set-up, surely they not only deserve psychological, moral, and philosophical exploration far deeper than anything in *In the Courts of the Sun*, but should be part of the thematic core of the overall work itself.

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PHONE READINGS

Finally, this great but severely flawed novel—a novel that despite its flaws, is a significant achievement not only of science fiction and historical fiction, but of the successful and seamless melding of the two with no contradictions—reveals what historical fiction, particularly historical fiction set in the deep past, and science fiction, particularly science fiction extrapolating from a civilization not the writer's own, share in terms of what research and empathetic imagination is needed.

Unlike D'Amato, I've never combined the two modes in the same novel, but I have written them separately. And considering what I have done, what Ian McDonald has done, and what Brian D'Amato has done, I think I can extract a rough overall recipe for what is required.

You have to do as much research as you can, using whatever materials may be available, to immerse yourself in the known physical, historical, philosophical, and quotidian details of the Other Culture as best you can. This is a species

of extended academic exercise the techniques for which can be taught and learned.

But then you have to be able to do what I call "Method Writing" in the Stanislavski sense. You have to assume the consciousness style of a character or characters *within* that Other Culture and tell the story from the inside.

How to this, I doubt anyone can teach.

Except to repeat the old saw that travel broadens the mind, and extend it into the contemporary realms of the virtual; fiction, music, cuisine, language, to travel within the realms of as many Other Cultures as you can by whatever means available; directly, or via media, on every level possible, from the lofty heights to the rhythms of the gutter, so that while they may remain different from your own, your mind is opened to the infinite multiplexity of human cultures and styles, real and to be imagined, so that nothing different remains alien.

Travel in this extended sense indeed broadens the mind.

It also renders it deeper. ○

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

March is the New York City area's time to shine, see you at LunaCon and ICon. Elsewhere, give MiniCon a thought. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 5 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

MARCH 2010

- 12-14—AllCon. For info, write: Box 177194, Irving TX 75019. Or phone: (817) 472-6368 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) all-con.org. (E-mail) Info@all-con.org. Con will be held in: the Dallas TX area (if city omitted, same as in address) at a venue to be announced. Guests will include: none announced at press time. Emphasis will be on media SF and costuming.
- 12-14—MegaCon. (727) 796-5725. megaconvention.com. Orange County Convention Center, Orlando FL. Comics/media.
- 12-14—A & G Ohio. aandgohio.com. Holiday Inn Eastgate, Cincinnati OH. Anime and gaming.
- 12-14—Anime Milwaukee. animemilwaukee.com. University of Wisconsin Union Building, Milwaukee WI.
- 12-14—KawaCon. kawacon.com. Crowne Plaza, Clayton MO. Bunraku Boy puppet troupe. Anime.
- 12-14—TimeQuest. +44 (0) 1428 718-137. tenthsplanet.co.uk. Theobalds Park, Cheshunt UK. With four doctors. Dr. Who.
- 12-15—RevelCon. severalunlimited.com. Houston TX. Long-running con for adult media fanzines.
- 19-21—LunaCon, Box 432, Bronx NY 10465. lunacon.org. Hilton, Rye Brook NY. T. Huff, T. Mather, A. Lonsdale, Corrado.
- 19-21—FantSciCon, 395 Stancil Rd., Rossville GA 30741. fantascicon.com. Howard Johnson's Plaza, Chattanooga TN.
- 19-21—KamikazeCon, Box 75101, Houston TX 77057. kamikazecon.com. Anime and gaming.
- 19-21—Corflu Cobalt. corflu.org. Winchester Hotel, Winchester UK. For fans of old-time fanzines.
- 19-21—KeoKon, 1701 Ridge St., Keokuk IA 52632. keokon.com. Triplanetary Speculative Arts Center. Axelrod. Anime.
- 25-28—World Horror Con, Box 64317, London NW6 9LL, UK. whc2010.org. Albion and Old Steyne Hotels, Brighton UK.
- 26-28—ICon, Box 550, Stony Brook NY 11754. iconsf.org. NY State University. SF, fact & fantasy. Thousands attend.
- 26-29—Edge of the Wild, c/o Malcx, 8 Wynchwood Ct., Moreton-in-Marsh GL56 0JQ, UK. adcbooks.co.uk. C. Tolkien.

APRIL 2010

- 2-4—MiniCon, Box 8297, Minneapolis MN 55408. mnstf.org. Sheraton, Bloomington MN. Sanderson, Dos Santos. SF/F.
- 2-4—SakuraCon, 3702 S. Fife, Suite K2, #78, Tacoma WA 98409. sakuracon.org. Convention Center, Seattle WA. Anime.
- 2-4—Anime Matsuri. animematsuri.com. The Woodlands, The Woodlands TX. Anime.
- 2-5—UK Nat'l. Con, c/o Marshall, 5 Longhaul Rd., Crookston G53 7SE, UK. odyssey2010.org. London UK. I.M. Banks.
- 9-11—RavenCon, 3502 Fernmoss Ct., Charlotte NC 28269. ravenccon.com. Richmond VA. R. Caine, R. Cat, S. Long.
- 9-11—Ad Astra, Box 7276, Toronto ON M5W 1X9. ad-astra.org. T. McCaffrey, E. Flint, R. J. Sawyer, A. Allston.
- 9-11—FILKONTario, 145 Rice Ave. #98, Hamilton ON L9C 6R3. filkontario.ca. Mississauga (Toronto) ON. SF folksinging.
- 9-11—SteamPosium. rose-society.org. St. Louis MO. Sponsored by the Royal Order of Steampunk Enthusiasts (ROSE).
- 10-11—HalCon. hal-con.net. Omiya City, Saitama Prefecture (near Tokyo). "The first Western-style con in Japan."
- 11—Castle Point Con, 1 Castle Point on the Hudson, Hoboken NJ 07030. castlepointanime.com. Stevens Institute. Anime.
- 16-18—Odyssey 2010, Box 7114, Madison WI 53707. oddcon.com. Radisson. Turtledove, T. Buckell, M. Cook. SF/fantasy.
- 16-18—KawaiiCon. kawaii-con.com. Info@kawaii-con.com. Ala Moana Hotel, Honolulu HI. Anime.
- 16-18—Sci Fi on the Rock. scifiontherock.com. Holiday Inn, St. Johns NB. C. Biggs, T. Amendola, N. Krishan.

AUGUST 2010

- 5-8—ReConStruction, Box 31706, Raleigh NC 27612. reconstructionsf.org. The North American SF Convention. \$110.

SEPTEMBER 2010

- 2-6—Aussiecon 4, GPO Box 1212, Melbourne VIC 3001, Australia. aussiecon4.org.au. World SF Convention. US\$225.

AUGUST 2011

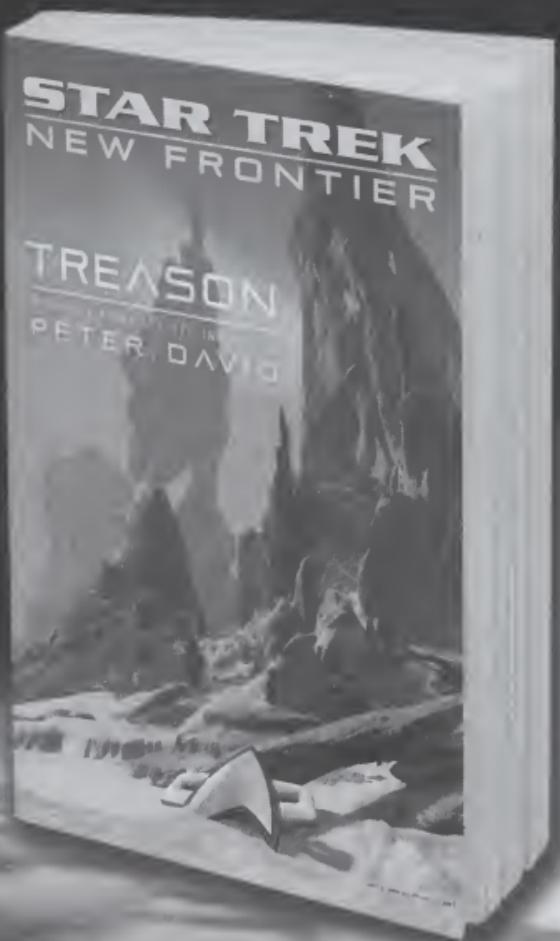
- 17-21—RenoVation, Box 13278, Portland OR 97213. rcfi.org. Reno NV. Asher, Brown, Powers, Vallejo. WorldCon. \$140.

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